UNDERCURRENTS OF FEAR

AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEEP DARK FEARS

UNDERCURRENTS OF FEAR

Edited
By

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COVER ART

"Black Widow Spider"
Victor Habbick

Image courtesy of FreeDigitalPhotos.net

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FOREWORD

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Welcome

The sky shines brightly above us and the moon and stars and sun make their revolutions but there is something else that is a constant and that is fear. Fear in all shapes and sizes, from the most minute to the largest, our lives are dictated by the pressures and diversions that fear presents. One way to conquer fear or, *I hesitate to say,* be chilled to the marrow is to read about it…to experience it through the eyes of another. This book is dedicated to those fears and their purveyors. I hope you enjoy this show, this grand ball of fears and frights with a moment of appreciated bliss. Read on gentle reader and be prepared to shiver with delight.

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About The Authors:

Help Wanted

Matthew Wilson

Richard took the stairs two at a time, and thought his exercise done for the day.

In the modern world of radio, lighthouses had little use beside tourist traps to bring money on dying towns. He supposed the Landro's lighthouse nice to stick on a postcard.

He wished he'd time for holidays, but as ever, work bought him to this drab town of one pub and wary locals.

The two previous lighthouse masters were washed over the railings and died in the sea below. Richard was paid to ascertain if it was double suicide, or a case of negligence.

If the company was found wanting in supplying sufficient safety features, the papers projected the two victims families looked at fifty thousand compensation each.

Richard didn't expect them to welcome him with open arms. Locals saw him a company man. Here to prove their testimonies hogwash and rob grieving families of their pay out.

"My son never drank in his life," Mrs. Davies cried and slapped him in the face.

Mr. Humbar let the air from his tires and Richard barely got away with a smashed windscreen. "That damn lighthouse killed my son," Humbar cried after him. "Go there and it'll eat your sanity too!

Fools. Richard wouldn't be surprised if these yokels cast the two lighthouse masters to the sea in some bizarre ceremony to satisfy long dead Gods. Richard did his homework. Though obsolete, lighthouse masters worked in pairs to keep the buildings condition in black.

The manual said in case of accidents or madness, one employee on any shift was not allowed.

Richard read the sentence ten times but still could not process it. Madness?

He supposed his employers would be unimpressed if someone went loopy and broke the light to make ships sink out in the water. But those days were over. Richard phoned his company and ordered another copy.

The new manual carried no such warning. Etched out as a product of the old worlds edition. Or maybe it was an appropriate course of action applying only here.

Richard sucked at the salty air, a poor diet made him wish this place had an elevator. Catching his breathe, he steadied himself and looked over the railing edge into the crashing waves below.

An initial feeling to throw himself to his destruction passed over him and fled in fear at the thought.

What a terrible way to die, he thought. But there had been a storm the night of death as the stations called it.

Lame, but they sold papers. Richard could not imagine what had bought dependable men out onto the outer landing on such a night. There was no sign of damage or work tools discarded in the middle of repairs.

For some reason, the two men stopped eating their still warm meals and walked through the emergency landing. The railings only came up to chest height, an easy climb for men determined to die.

Richard gave it a hearty shake and jerked back, since falling from a tree as a child, he had a fear of heights, but money was money and he was in bad need of it.

With what locals spray painted on his car, he'd been scared to come here during the day. Feeling safer with ghosts of dead men, then irate parents who thought him a snitch, a snoop, Richard did his round and found nothing to contradict the police report.

He laughed, despite himself at some childish scrawl on the wall.

Aliens did it.

Punks must come here to smoke and drink warm beer. Richard had done as bad when he was younger but though he tried to install happy memories in his mind, the cold of the place sapped all recollection of suns and birthday cakes.

His hands were freezing and the absurd idea overcame him not to touch the railing again in case his hand attached to it.

That place will eat your sanity!

Richard scoffed and made his notes. He'd made his money.

"This place can kiss-"

He stopped talking when he heard a door open downstairs, then close.

Footsteps, he realized.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

I got something for you, Richard thought and lay down his notebook. He'd never been in a fight, bolster to burn away his fear. But if Davies had followed him here to demand he leave things be; then Richard had the thing to scare him off.

Coshes were illegal but he wasn't going to put it on his CV. Last year, a young punk with a five hundred dollar bounty on his head over unpaid parking tickets came at him with one raised over his head. The idiot, high on Horse tranquilizers tripped up over his own feet and thinking the weapon handy in a tight spot, Richard had taken possession of it before police arrived.

He struck air with it and the telescopic top protruded out like woman's lipstick. Richards heart tried to kick out his chest cavity but biting his lip till the smell of blood stopped him, Richard made himself into a small ball and waited in the dark.

Richard had no delusions of being a hero, but was surprised when squinting, he saw a familiar figure reach the top of the stairs and move confidentially toward the widow.

It was Ms. Davies.

She must have hurt herself in breaking the door, blood came down her arms as if fresh from red rain.

Too much blood.

I'm not out there, darling, Richard thought, trying not to laugh he was so relieved she had instantly gone outside, sure to find the interfering scab making notes. She would push him, make it look like an accident and-

Richard stopped thinking when Ms. Davies quite nimbly stepped up onto the railing, without fear and looked at the water below.

The insanity of it broke his muteness and he ran at her, hoping to tackle her. Pull her from the deadly precipice before she destroyed herself too.

"Davies! Wait!"

The woman had sleepy eyes and a resigned smile. She blinked as if waking and faced the man she slapped earlier in the evening. "Oh, it's you. It's quite alright," she said. "I'm not really here."

She did not scream as she fell forward and seemed to fly forever before smashing on the rocks below.

Richard fell to his knees, weeping, sure his soul had been ripped out by such a ghastly thing.

The police did not like being called out on wild goose chases.

They knew things were lost in seas all the time. Things were swallowed up and spat out but they doubted Richards story of Ms. Davies having come here in the dead of night and killed herself.

By the time the officers pulled up at the lighthouse, they had gotten reports the poor grieving mother had been dead a good six hours. Richards visit had been the last straw opening fresh wounds and she had slit her wrists with a razor.

Richard didn't care what they said, or that Davies' body lay at rest in a hospital drawer. No, he'd not been drinking and wasn't under stress. The police did not hide their desire to brush him off.

He was not welcome here and they would waste no time babying him.

"You plan to spend the whole night here, sir?" One policeman asked as if awaiting a punch line. Some silly story a friend let slip he'd not quite believed.

Richard disliked wasting time too. Let the fools laugh back to the station. He knew what he saw. "Yes."

The mans badge said Anderson. Richard would remember it when he made his report. "And they call the guys I arrest nuts." Anderson lamented. "Be sure to call us if something real happens sir. But no more ghost stories, huh? Then we may have to run you in."

"Forgive me for asking for help. If a serial killer breaks in, I'm sure I can handle it."

Anderson did not take the bait. He wanted the guy and his bad vibe out of town, not clogging up his cell and paperwork. "You have a nice evening, sir. I don't want you falling down those nasty long steps."

"And let you miss your favorite program back at the station?"

Richard waved as the car pulled away, slamming the door to use up some anger before it made a monster and burned into his belly. He punched the door and called the police fools.

He stopped breathing, being, when he heard the footsteps going up the stairs ahead of him.

Someone was here, with him.

"Hello?" He said, touched the door handle and thought it too late. The police would be gone by then. "That was a real nice trick, Ms. Davies. Wot, you hook up some kind of projector to do the swan dive trick?"

His knees locked, resisted the idea of going up the steps, but he had to be master of this place if he was to call it home. Even for a night. If he let any fragment of fear into his heart, he knew it would paralyze him completely and tomorrow the men who came to hear his report would lock him in a padded room.

If he had not already thrown himself to the sea.

"You got a twin sleeping in the hospital, or did you take pills to slow your heart and make yourself look dead? Ms. Davies?"

He thought her too old for games. "Ms-" He screamed, threw his hands up before his face as the great light came on. A beacon for ships many miles from shore to lock upon and be lead home.

The brilliant ball of light. A small sun contained in the upper deck blasted into his face and despite his hands he was sure with the aching burn he was blind. He could see through his eyelids, his blood throbbed through his veins.

"Turn it off!" He wailed, staggering back. The taste of salt grew thicker on his tongue so he knew he was near the window. "Turn it-"

Something hard hit the centre of his chest and when the fingers flexed, their nails drawing blood, he howled as he fell backwards against the railing. Their quality held out and they did not snap, but the force was enough to propel him backward over the edge.

He fell briefly, his shoulder twisting horribly as he locked his arms round the condensation cool metal. Limply, legs kicking he hung there, hearing the sea crash beneath him like an angry witches cauldron.

He yelled at the maniac stood over him, watching him. He wished for rain to clear his eyes and the police to come back. He would apologize, only if they took him to the hospital. He was sure his arm was out the socket.

"Let me live," he wept. "Let me-"

He knew he must have been blind then for the light went out entirely. Blinking, trying to lick his eyes in confusion to make sure they were open, he realized through the daze the light had been turned off.

For a while, darkness reigned. Thenthroguh the dancing spots he saw stars. He thought them beautiful, some small beacon of light to hang on to as he bit the edge off his tongue as he swung his legs as if angry at the air.

For a while he swung like the pendulum of a grandfather clock and locked his feet round the upper rail.

Safety. Sweet safety.

"To hell with all of you," he wept, staggering to his feet, throwing up his sole working hand that seemed to retain some gas. Money was money. Not life and death. He supported his weight by sliding along the wall.

He was half way down when he felt those hands shove him again. The world revolved and he thought about the cop.

You have a nice evening, sir. I don't want you falling down those nasty long steps.

He did not lose consciousness completely. He heard the laughter as he turned over and dragged himself to the door.

It was locked.

"I didn't do nuffin" he cried when he heard the footsteps.

Someone was coming down the stairs, toward him.

"You think him drunk?" Anderson said again and the company man thought it was only natural.

Solitude was a terrible thing and set many men off drinking.

"Of course. You saw the state of the body when we pulled him out the sea. Ain't no sober man gonna throw himself onto those rocks like that." The idea of the last two men came to mind and he amended his last statement as "Not in the same month, anyway."

"So you'll be looking for another lighthouse master?" Anderson asked, trying not to look up at the cursed building. That damn safety rail that should have come down in a thousand storms.

"Why? You interested?"

"Me?" Anderson scoffed. "No. I know my history and my jobs dangerous enough. With this places reputation, how will you get new employees?"

"Simple. I won't tell 'em."

"Well ain't you considerate. Not making people worry about-" Anderson stopped talking and Richards boss looked up at the broken window. The fool must have kicked it out in his final moments, scattering glass shards to the sea. So sure was he to end his days.

The damage of impact had covered up his previous mutilations.

"What?"

Anderson put his hand against the sun. "Thought I saw- no, doesn't matter."

"No ghosts?"

Anderson laughed and walked the man back to the car. They had enough for their report here. Only once did the policeman look back at the building, choosing to ignore the image of Richard watching him.

That damn scab was dead in the hospital drawer next to Ms. Davies.

He felt he could not wait till the end of his shift. After he dropped the company man off, he was heading for the bar.

The Witch

Matthew Wilson

Sharon found the old woman and came no closer when she saw the knife in her hand.

Around her slippers were old shavings of pumpkin skins where she whittled eyes out for her grand children's delight. Now the serrated edge of steel caught the sunlight and spitefully, purposefully, the old woman directed the gleam into Sharon's eye.

She envies my youth, Sharon thought and fixed a smile she hoped did not show many teeth. Best not to be threatening, which was a challenge at five foot three.

"Morning," Sharon said. "I'm with the news-"

"I know why you're here, lassie." Said the old woman. "You've come about the witch."

Sharon waited till the butterflies completely left her belly. She had been surprised to get the job at all for she was not shockingly pretty. When young, she had walked into a set of French doors, not seeing the glass and her crooked nose had not set right.

Set back by insecurities, she felt her future lay distinctly behind the camera rather than in front of it. But she was last in the office, working harder than other interns to propel herself forward as usual when news came in by fax.

A woman believed to be a witch had been hounded to her house and burned alive. In this day and age! Based on the idea a neighbor who disliked the woman had caught fever from drinking bad water died, and locals believed this enough evidence to bring down their own brand of vengeance.

Sharon had gone to the house first, still not believing modern medicine could be abandoned for forgotten superstition. But she had photos of the still smoking remains and charred ground that would never grow grass again.

The idea this could happen had left her sick and thrilled at the same time for though a person was dead, Sharon had a chance to make her name. If she got all the details, if she impressed her boss, she would not have to

sell her body as rumors insisted was the only way to forge ahead in the reporter business.

"If you wish to make a statement-" Sharon felt light headed as a pumpkin scented breeze whipping down the street seemed to push her from the front porch for her own good.

"That gal was no good," said the old woman, not dropping the knife. "I said my peace to the police, and that's that. I didn't see who did it."

Sharon checked her notes. "Word to my office confirms the whole town came to her house in the night and-"

"Oh?" The old woman chipped in with sudden curiosity like Sharon finally had her full attention. In her eyes were a coldness that Sharon shared in her belly. "Who said that?"

If Sharon was privy to that information, she would still have said nothing for snitches may have the same life expectancy as witches in these parts. She changed position from questioned to questioner quick. "So you're saying -" she checked a slip of paper. "Tanya Bortan was really a witch? You don't have to worry, the police are making their own investigation. I'm just getting the story."

The old woman sniffed and stood, still that big, bright blade in her hand made Sharon draw back for she could quite believe she may spring forward and plant it in her. "You'll be the making of your own headline if you don't leave now, dear."

Sharon felt vindicated in her suspicion. She readied herself to run. "You're threatening me?"

"Not me, dear." Said the old woman and headed to her bed, shuffling as if her joints throbbed painfully in cold air. "My lynching days are done, but there are many here who like to keep their secrets till death. If you value your life, you'll be out of town by night."

Sharon jumped as the door banged shut and she felt more alone than ever in her life.

The town of sandy stream had a bad reputation with witches. The founders had theorized the best way to appease some sleeping God ignoring them as they starved and shivered in their first year of settlement, was to burn women.

This seemed to only exacerbate the matter as Rupert Manners who proclaimed himself mayor of this new town and subsequent hanging judge

was found dead later.

His two sons died of belly cramps some thought poison before Christmas, and though an additional four relatives of the initial women were burned at the stake to save their souls, before the first year was out, another ten people would die.

And still the sleeping God would not save his devoted, so the belief that desperate women turned to black magic deepened to the point that fools believed nothing grew on the site of the burnings. No crops would rise from the land where witch ashes were scattered.

So the town starved and still in modern times, it's descendants believed in silly things as curses and the promise of fire as salvation.

In her room, Sharon made notes of the fragments the local library could give her. The crone behind the desk had looked at her most pointedly as she read out the list of books she was most interested in, and after much tutting, complied.

Mr. Cartwright had given her three days to impress him and all she had was wrist strain and a quarter notepad filled with scratched out ramblings and potions how to make a man fall in love.

Cartwright was a strange choice for a communications editor as a child, for a dare he had put his tongue into a moving desk fan and lost the tip of it so much of his correspondence - orders came through heated letters.

If this was all she would come back with; he rather she didn't.

"Concentrate on the murder, not the magic." Sharon said to herself, trying to spread the potent migraine round her eyes so it would not entirely burn out one area.

"Here is a story of pent up secrets disguised with some tag as silly magic." Maybe the deceased had been merry with one of the husbands or came upon an embezzling secret at work. To make her fortune, Sharon would beat the police and hit a motive first.

There could be no witches in this century. She showered, slept and snapped awake on the other side of midnight when she heard the screams. Down the street from the hotel room she had rented, something was happening.

A house burned!

Stubbing her toe hard enough on the edge of the bed to break a nail, Sharon ran for the door, snatching her camera from the night stand like a

drowning man would a life jacket. She was determined to see how deep the story went.

The police said the woman died quickly, and that was some small mercy. Apparently, an electrical fault had spat sparks upon the curtain and the sleeping owner had drowned as smoke filled her lungs, before the fire had grown legs and coming upstairs had devoured the rest of her being.

Anna Bortan was written on the charred post box and the warning "We take care of our own problems" had been etched into a nearby tree by ghoulish children.

Quickly, the adults took this down, but not before Sharon had a photo for posterity. The name Anna meant nothing to her, till she made something of a demand of Mr. Cartwright who relented she had been the whistle blower who made mention of the murder of the witch.

Her sister.

"None of that family were any good," The old woman said as she stopped sweeping pumpkin peelings from her porch and held the knot of pent stress in the centre in her back. "You make mention of that young girl, I-"

"You'll what?" Sharon felt bolder in the light of day. She waited for the woman to speak her mind and give her a chance to make her name. "I thought you said your lynching days were over?"

The old woman watched her a while, smiling, undefeated. "There are some who have courage to take on evil themselves with no need of encouragement from the old."

Sharon noticed children playing ball down the street and pointed them out, "And these? You would wish a world where children are taught that kind of thing?"

"The world is full of wicked things, dear." The old woman turned her warped back, indicating this second, equally unwanted interview was at an end. "We must all use our tools and courage to rid it of evil as we can."

Sharon tried to press the matter, to make the old woman's hate spill something, but she was gone. Filling her hand with money, Sharon approached the children, wishing to ask them a question. But by the time she reached half way, they had run back to their mommas as instructed

Word was no one should speak to the snooper under warning of being outcast as a witch. For someone as wicked as the reporter wishing to undo

all their good work, their mothers mentioned they had something quite unpleasant planned for her.

Jason found the old woman and came no closer when she saw the knife in her hand.

"You lost, young man?" Asked the old woman, licking the pumpkin juice from the scarred side of the blade.

Jason apologized for his speech impediment, hoped the old woman did not think him mocking, but he had lost the tip of it in a fan as a boy. "I'm found, dear. It's one of my interns who seems to have vanished. I'm wondering if you saw her at all?"

The old woman watched him a while. He had come from a fancy car, smelling of fancy aftershave and promised fresh, fancy problems. He made a flimsy introduction with the name Cartwright, attempting to pick apart her silent treatment.

"Sharon came to sandy stream last week and-"

"No, dear." Said the old woman. "There's been no young blood here in quite a while. Are you here to stay?"

"A while." Jason said, disliking the way light seemed to catch her eyes and find him out like witches fire.

Yes. Witch, he realized, she looked like an old and ugly witch.

"Until I find my friend." He admitted.

"How wonderful," said the old woman. "Always nice to have new friends." She watched him walk back to his car, drive on to the only hotel in the street, and carried on carving faces into her pumpkins.

There was such wickedness in the world, thought the old woman. But no matter, the town knew how to take care of it's own problems.

Second Chances

Matthew Wilson

His mother had been dead three days before he went down into the crypt.

His father had made a good location of the mound, it had yet to be discovered by thieves who would strip her death bed of anything they could trade in the markets,

The air was hot and clots of dust collected behind his tonsils, breaking him into a coughing fit he had to bite down before it bought unwanted attention. He'd had to rely on moonlight to retrace his steps here, and only lit the candle when he'd nearly broke his toe on the many half finished stones littering the floor.

Mothers death had come on quick, father told her not to go swimming in the Nile. But it was the height of summer and she played, kicked in the shallows. By the end of the week she was suffering badly with fever, striking Ma'la when he bought his mother food for believing him to be a demon come to finish her off.

Her end was almost a blessing for they had never got on.

But even a half hearted woman was still a mother. Ma'la thought it would be good to see her again. Even if dad had blown his top when he bought the matter up. It seemed like an over reaction but he had slain the slaves that buried her and kept Ma'la away from the incarceration and massacre ceremonies.

But he missed her, had bought the information from local children who'd been braver than he and snuck along with the funeral procession at some safe distance. There was so little to do on the banks of the known world. Since the fever, swimming was banned.

"Hello, mother." Ma'la said, lay down the candle and opened the piece of parchment to the highlighted segment.

Father would be worse than annoyed if he caught him doing this black magic, worse than grounding or turning his back on him. He might go so far as to ensure he was thrown out the town. Or killed.

But Ma'la missed his mother. Even if she could be a cold customer, dead set in mind when she had an idea on her head. If she said it was one thing that she could not be dissuaded.

That brilliant mind that rested in a canopic jar, wrenched out by crocodile snout like pliers through her - no, he would not think of it. He felt queasy enough by the vile images on the wall telling her life story. No wonder dad didn't wish him to come here.

Mom had a dark history he wished to save his boy from. But now Ma'la had his second chance. Mom would her boy would reconnect and she would have tell him in her own good time about her chequered past.

About where he got his fascination of dead Gods from.

Shortly he scattered the Donkey bones and began the incantations jumping slightly as the wind snubbed out the candle, and before he had the chance to find flint it came alive like a squinting blue eye.

For a while the candle seemed to watch him, disapprovingly. Then he noticed movement, the sarcophagus lid was sliding back. It fell to the floor with a heavy clang like a window coming out of it's painted foundations.

Ma'la sat stunned, not believing it would work. Some small act of closure to make him realize that mom was truly gone, that there was no way back.

The things bandages twisted as she sat up, hardly pleased.

"Mom?" Ma'la asked.

The thing coughed spiders and came at him, "Demon." She said.

"No, mom. It's your son. Ma'la!"

The creature did not listen, even in death, when she had an idea in the dust of her mind, it was hard to dissuade her from it.

How Many More Fears

David Perlmutter

The seventh grade had not been a pleasant experience for Clytemnestra Martinez. In truth, that was putting it mildly. “Cly”, as she was known in the short, semi-affectionate manner often used by middle school kids amongst their peers, was known for several things amongst hers. First, she was known as someone who observed no social or fashion trends other than her own. This was represented most commonly by a limited fashion repertoire of open leather jackets, midriff revealing T shirts, and a Clydesdale-sized pony tail continually in her voluminous black hair. Also, she had a tendency to give “the bird”, literally and figuratively, to anyone who even remotely inquired about her difficult and troubling past and equally troubling present. Much more damaging to her social reputation was her being what was politely referred to as an “uncoordinated klutz”

Cly had the rather unfortunate luck of repeatedly being in situations where she was bound to get her head or some other body part stuck in any protruding orifice, mechanical or otherwise, that she had the poor luck to encounter. Her repeated encounters with these items- tubas, waterslides, museum exhibitions, the armpits of the taller, smarter and more athletically inclined girls, who were inclined to use this status to repeatedly give her unwanted “noogies” in the confines of the gym locker room- had made her what passed for a common “joke” among her peers possible that unfortunate year. This only exacerbated tensions within her relationship with her peers, exhibited primarily by her giving fat lips to anyone who mouthed off to her about the unfortunate circumstances, especially to the boys (and, more embarrassingly, some girls) who openly suggested that they wanted Cly to get her body “stuck” to them in another, and more revolting, way.

By the end of May, with the school year mercifully at an end, Cly had had enough. Empanada, California, her home town, as far as she was concerned, could kiss her big light brown Mexican ass goodbye. Without the objections of her foster family, who considered her a belligerent nuisance by any standard, she gathered her few worldly possessions in her back pack and set off to find a real place in the world and people who would respect her instead of constantly needling and mocking her.

She found it at Bradbury Tours, a nearby carnival/circus combine that had seen far better days than the ones it was now encountering. A small collection of tented sideshow attractions coupled with a limited animal menagerie, Bradbury Tours annually made a trek in the summer months between Anaheim and Spokane to what was becoming a smaller and smaller group of paying customers every year. Consequently, carnival owner R.D. Bradbury was more than happy to see a young lady like Cly take an active interest in the carnival. So many of her jaded contemporaries were more likely to see his business as an ancient relic which had been passé even in the days of her parents. He hired her on the spot, promising that with her attitude, she was likely to "go far" in the carnival business. She liked the sound of that. Very much.

By the time the carnival was ready to go in July, Cly had mastered much of the day-to-day operations so well that Bradbury was more than willing to give her the chance to present her own exhibition as part of the proceedings. She already had something in mind. She had befriended Professor Joshi, the tour's resident mystic, an East Indian who had (so he claimed) studied in his youth with the masters of the Oriental art of mind control. Specifically, he was able to convince those in his presence, through hypnotic projections, that they were seeing things or experiencing events that triggered their greatest fears. After Cly experienced a session with him, and didn't recover from the breakdown that resulted until two days afterward, she demanded that he teach her how to do it herself. He agreed, although he indicated that it was a complex process that she might have to spend years to learn. She mastered it in a matter of weeks and, to his horror, Professor Joshi had put himself out of work. Since he had been reduced to a gibbering idiot by an intense psychic probe from Cly, that did not matter anymore, anyway.

And so, when Bradbury Tours arrived for its annual one week stand in Empanada, the only place left where it was still guaranteed a standing offer, Cly was more than prepared. Not only to astound the locals with the mental powers she now possessed in abundance, but to gain revenge on all of the peers who had mocked her the previous year. Starting with two in particular….

The tent was nothing much. It was simply a casing of burlap over a bundle of sticks placed at compass positions to provide a foundation, and it

radiated heat in the 80 degree temperatures that summer day. Who would want to spend even a couple of minutes inside that thing if they were sane? Especially when they read what was supposedly going to go on in there if they chose to enter?

That was what was going through Lee McGregor's mind as soon as she saw the tent and the nameplate on it which outlined what was to go on once the customers entered. The poor appearance of the tent, coupled with what to her was the absurd hyperbole of the sign, caused her to collapse on the ground and vibrate with laughter.

If you were to open a dictionary to search for the word "tomboy", then it likely would have Lee McGregor's picture alongside of it, for her actions, beliefs, indeed her very existence was based upon living up to the expectations and ideals set out by that particular sociological category. She was an athletic, muscular specimen and physically attractive besides. Had she chose to conform to the social expectations related to her gender- fashion, chasing boys, and so on- she may well have succeeded. But such was not the case. Being from a family of eight siblings increased her competitive and territorial instincts to their maximum potential, and the fact that all of her siblings were boys made this even more of a prerogative. As a consequence, Lee was competitive in every sport open to her, and bad to the proverbial bone, as a hostile demeanor maintained to non-friends outside of the gym or playing field made readily apparent. Only her truest associates knew the deeper side of what was actually in her red haired dome and, even to them, she was reluctant (with the typical reticence of the tomboy) to explain these matters in more detail.

One of these friends, attracted by the hysterics that the quaking Lee seemed to be going through, quickly rushed to her side, righted her onto her feet, and gave her a sobering slap on the face. Actually, it was a couple of slaps, since Lee failed to get the message at first. But the message was eventually understood.

The girl who rushed to her friend's aid was in many ways the polar opposite of Lee, making it very unlikely from initial appearances that they were in fact best friends. This was because Tabitha Kroger preferred exercising her mind to the exercising that was Lee's forte. Prim, bespectacled and clad conservatively in blouse and skirt- in contrast to the *faux* male manner of Lee in her sweaters, sweatshirts and jeans- Tabitha was not one to be messed with mentally as Lee was not to be physically.

Concentrating on educational pursuits, though not to the point that she was unapproachable by her peers, Tabitha was known on campus (though rarely addressed as such without consequence in her presence) as "The Brain" for her extraordinarily high scholastic achievements. With this level of achievement- the lot of being an only child of subtly demanding parents- came an extraordinary level of fear about damage to her public image and that of her friends as well, even if they did not care about such things as much as she did. That particularly included Lee, whose mental prowess and level of concern about such things was nowhere near Tabitha's. Hence the duly noted steps taken by the latter to "correct" the former's behavior as shown above.

"Damn it!" Lee cursed as the full impact of Tabitha's slap creased onto her face. "What the hell was *that* for, Tab?"

"You were embarrassing yourself, Lee!" Tabitha answered in her coldest scholarly fashion. "And, by extension, me! Do you think I want to get the reputation of being the best friend of a hysterical *moron*?"

"That never stopped you from hanging with me before," Lee answered. "And besides which, you're more hysterical than I am, anyway!"

"I am *not*!" Tabitha responded, her face flushing with blood.

"You are!"

"I am not!"

"You *are*!"

"I AM NOT!"

This debate that passed for intelligence and sophistication in California middle schools continued for about three minutes more in the same fashion. The possibility that the two participants might come to blows over which of them was the more hysterical began growing. However, Tabitha abruptly curtailed the debate by shouting "STOP!" just when the four minute mark was about to be reached. The duo then looked with dagger eyes at the small group of boys their age who had gathered expecting a catfight- at which point this group quickly dispersed itself.

"Look, Lee," Tabitha said by way of apology, "our friendship is too important for us to risk a fight over which of our phases of the moon is more destructive to our mental health!"

"Huh?" said Lee.

"What I mean is, it's not good for us to be arguing over which of us is more hysterical than the other. Hysteria is a *bad* thing!"

“You mean like an STD?” Lee asked, backing away from Tabitha as if she were a leper as she spoke. “I hope it’s not contagious, Tab, ‘cause all the time I spent with you, I could…”

“No, stupid!” Tabitha answered, though affectionately, as she put her hand on her friend’s broad, muscled shoulders to calm her down. “Hysteria’s not an STD. It’s just something some nut-ball men invented back in the dark ages to explain to themselves why we women supposedly were “crazy” a lot of the time. They said that our periods turned us into unapproachable monsters who were unreasonable and destructive.

“But they don’t, do they?” Lee answered. “I mean, it’d be all cool and stuff to turn into a vampire or werewolf for a day or so every month, work off all those extra frustrations that build up….”

“Fortunately, for both of us, they don’t!” Tabitha said with a clinical finality that showed Lee that she intended to sew up the discussion neatly like an inseam and that it was *not* to continue past that point, something Lee well knew from previous experience and did not attempt. “Hysteria is just our emotions and fears getting out of control, and we need to keep them *in* control if we expect to keep ourselves in check. *Understand*?”

Lee nodded.

“So,” Tabitha said as she walked towards the tent where Lee had been standing, “what exactly was it that brought on your little hysterical episode?”

“Come again?” asked Lee.

“What were you LAUGHING about?” Tabitha responded, with some frustration, a reflection of her feelings about her friend’s lack of intelligence compared with hers.

“Oh, that!” Lee said. “I just saw the little descriptive bit on this nameplate over here, and I just couldn’t hold it in anymore. It was just *unbelievable*!”

“*I’ll* be the judge of that!” Tabitha said determinedly. “You *know* what my attitude towards the supernatural is!” Lee nodded again, because she did, all too well.

Firmly, Tabitha grasped the tent’s nameplate, written in black marker on a piece of cardboard which had been firmly attached to the side of one side of the tent’s body, and read it out loud:

BEWARE!

Do not trespass the border of the Temple Of Fears!

Should you attempt to go beyond this sign, you will be confronted with the most horrifying sights and sounds you ever dreamed you would have to confront in your life. Your deepest phobias will be visible, your deepest regrets plainly seen, and your deepest fears will become reality. Stay away from here if you do not wish to experience the greatest collection of frightful sounds and images you will ever be forced to witness.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED

Tabitha let the warning sign slip out of her grasp with a violent gesture of finality. "Hah!" she said loudly to anyone in earshot, including Lee, who was not at all convinced that such a brazen act could entirely rid the tent of the imposing, threatening aura that it possessed.

"So you think like I do about it, do ya?" Lee prodded. "That it's all a bunch of tommyrot and junk?"

"Obviously!" responded Tabitha. "This is just a penny ante traveling show that comes here every year 'cause it has no other place to go! I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be as shoddy and cheap as the rest of the tour!"

"You mean you aren't put off by the come-on?" Lee continued. "It creeped me out for a second- but *just* for a second, understand?" Lee had her reputation to protect, as any overtly "girlish" behavior on her part might jeopardize her "tomboy" social status. And being scared in public was the most "girlish" thing of all.

"Please," Tabitha countered. "It'll take a lot more than that to scare me! They're not even *trying* with this!"

"Is that so?" Lee said, thumbing the belt loops of her jeans. "I don't scare that easily, either. You saying you're *better* than me?"

"For God's sake, Lee," Tabitha said, trying to avoid her friend's gaze and not entirely making it. "Don't make *everything* into a competition between us!"

"So you *do* think you're better than me!" Lee roared bluntly, her face flushing. "Don't make me slap your face, Kroger!"

"All right, Ms. Iron Girl!" Tabitha countered. "I'll take you up on that offer! The first of us to spend more than three minutes inside that burlap oven is the better girl at not being scared!"

"Got it!" Lee said. "I'll go first!"

“Please do,” Tabitha said, visibly bothered by her friend’s cocksure behavior. “Anything to stop you being so *repulsive*!”

And so, Lee entered the tent- an act she would soon come to regret.

To prove her bravery to Tabitha, Lee made it a point to enter the tent without looking back at her while she did. At the flap of the tent, she parted the covering and entered, closing the flap behind her. Then she surveyed the chamber of horrors around her, which consisted of:

Nothing. Nothing whatsoever of consequence, aside from an envelope of Rosco fog at the back of the tent.

“This is a rip!” Lee said softly to herself. “Well, I can’t back out now. I gotta show Tab that I’m tough so she’ll respect me better….”

“Come closer, mortal!” a semi- familiar voice to Lee’s ears called out from the P.A. system at the back. “But approach the facilities with care!”

Lee was stunned, but only for a moment. She had to be brave about this, remember?

“Who are you?” she demanded. “Also, *where* are you? I can’t see a thing through that blasted fog you got over there!”

“Come ahead through the fog!” said the voice. “It will not harm you.”

“Yeah,” Lee said to herself as she advanced into the fog. “But the question is: Will *you*?”

Eventually the fog parted, and Lee could see what was being dealt with here. A small steel box, resembling a case used to transport electrical speakers or musical instruments, was resting against the far end of the tent, which was leaning against a shadowy enclave in which a mysterious figure lurked. Above the box, supported by cables, was a pair of steel gloves, not unlike those used by nuclear power plant technicians for the handling of hazardous materials, into which this shadowy figure slipped its own hands.

“Come on!” it purred towards Lee. “I merely wish to probe your inner feelings to see your fears so that you may be in a position to confront them on your own.”

“Like the school psychiatrist?” Lee asked. “’Cause I don’t like him that much….”

“Yes,” was the answer. “But I am a person of your own age, and I may be able to help you deal with them more quickly and in a more constructive way.”

Lee shrugged. “What have I got to lose?” she said rhetorically, and advanced forward.

Lee sat on the box with her legs out forward, as she was then instructed to do, and remained perfectly still, also as she was instructed, as the mechanical hands stuck themselves tightly to the sides of her head. They began to massage her temple, as one might do to relieve a migraine headache, and the process began.

As Lee was being calmed by the slow massage of her head, she gradually began slipping out of consciousness, as a supernatural force began imposing the will of her subconscious into the forefront. A final more forceful slap, like hitting a glass ketchup bottle, projected her subconscious into view as a ghostly avatar figure as her conscious form slipped into sleep.

The ghostly figure of Lee, acting as if on a motion picture screen, began to walk forward. However, it was not long before she was surrounded by other ghostly figures, who began to mock and jeer at her viciously.

“Cut it out!” Lee ordered viciously, shaking her fist. They did not, so she repeated the order, adding a promise to strike one of them in the face if they did not stop, but they acted as if her words made no impact on them.

It was only then that she began to stare down at herself to better ascertain what the problem was. And she found out to her horror that her worst fear had been realized! She was clad only in the barest of garments required for modesty, and was helpless in the presence of the other spirits, who began to advance towards her menacingly.

Letting out an agonized yelp, Lee had no choice but to run away to save herself. Fortunately, she was skilled at this, and had soon left her pursuers far in the distance. But then another fear confronted her.

Despite her tomboy sensibilities, Lee had one typically “girlish” fear-that of insects. She feared being surrounded and attacked by them when she was most vulnerable, and did her best in the real world to avoid them. But this was not the real world in any way recognizable to her. The threatened attack by the monsters upon her made this clear to her, but now the unreality of the events became clear as a variety of insects, all as big or bigger than her, clawed their way towards her.

Lee tried to defend herself, adopting her best street fighting and karate moves, but it was no use. A giant ant grabbed a section of her hair with its mandible, while, on the other side of her, an equally large tarantula put its leg around her arm and tried to pull her away from the ant. This resulted in

a tug of war with Lee at the center. She grunted painfully as she was fought over. Finally, asserting her strength, she broke free and ran away from them. But then, from out of nowhere, a seemingly bottomless cliff emerged. Lee knew she had only two choices: stay with the insects and be fought over, or jump. So she jumped….

And that was when she woke up, wild-eyed and screaming in blood-curdling terror.

Horrified, but now having safely resumed her fully clothed, conscious identity, Lee bolted upright, threw the mechanical hands off her, and rushed out with an expression of terror on her face. She had been wronged mentally- that was clear to Tabitha as Lee came out of the tent shaken. Immediately, the bespectacled girl felt a wave of indignation sweep over her as she looked at the disturbed facial appearance of her usually implacable friend.

"Lee!" Tabitha shouted as Lee emerged from the tent. "What have they *done* to you?"

"Dude, you don't want to know!" Lee said, the shock still evident in her voice. "It was like I got *probed* or something! Somehow, they knew what creeped me out the most and projected my worst nightmares in front of my eyes! They made me experience everything I ever feared might ever happen to me, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it! I never felt so helpless in my life!"

"How DARE they!" Tabitha raged, her fists clenched. "You leave this to me, Lee! This will NOT STAND!"

"But you don't know what you're up against, dude!" Lee protested. "We're talking deep mind probes here! They'll make you see what you fear so badly…."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Tabitha said dismissively. "They were just using corny parlor tricks to fool you. They probably just put you to sleep and made you dream that stuff yourself. That's all it was, Lee- dreams! They put you to sleep and made you bring those fears up on yourself. They manipulated you, violated your constitutional right to privacy. But I'll see to it they won't fool anyone else any longer!"

"No, Tab!" Lee protested. "You don't know what you're dealing with…."

“Don’t tell me what I don’t know!” Tabitha countered fiercely. “I know that you, my best friend, had her subconscious violated by a *charlatan*, and I know that I am going to obtain revenge one way or another!”

And so, without another word, Tabitha Kroger parted the folds of the tent entrance and entered the tent.

“All right, you!” she demanded sharply to the figure hidden behind the Rosco fog at the back of the tent. “Come out of there so I can deal with you face to face!”

“What do you mean by “dealing” with me?” the voice of the figure said questioningly over the P.A. system.

“I haven’t decided that yet,” replied Tabitha. “But I know for certain that I want revenge on you for the scare you just gave my friend Lee McGregor. Normally, she’s rock solid, but you have her looking as white as a sheet now. And I want to know *why*!”

“I cannot disclose my secrets to you, mortal,” answered the voice. “They are called “trade secrets” for a reason, you know! But I am prepared to offer your friend an apology for probing her like that. Her brain capacity is somewhat limited, seeing as she is quite stupid and animalistic in her behavior. You, on the other hand, seem to me to be considerably more intelligent, and would thus provide fuel for a more adventurous and fulfilling probe of your subconscious, for both you and me.”

“Gee,” said a flattered Tabitha, all thoughts of vengeance for her friend suddenly vanishing as she completely bought into this incredible suck-up job, much to her own surprise. “Do you really think so?”

“Only one way to find out,” said the voice. “Come forward.”

Much to Tabitha’s shock, she seemed utterly compelled to comply with the request. Without giving it much thought, a completely new experience for her, she sat down on the box, allowed the metal-gloved hands to begin massaging her scalp and retrieving her ghostly dream avatar from her head, and fell into unconsciousness while her subconscious stepped to the forefront, just as it had with Lee.

It was true that Tabitha’s dreaming experience was somewhat different than Lee’s, though not on a radical scale. The major additions were the more modern basics of the movie-going experience: sound, color and more animated performances from the surrounding cast, which now began

to envelope her into the dramatic situation she was already hungering to be part of in the real world and which only her age had so far served as a barrier to.

From the surface appearances, things initially went well. Tabitha was thrust into an environment where only her skill and expertise, it seemed, could solve the problem at hand. She was guided into some sort of operating theatre where she was expected to provide a solution immediately and effectively. But that was where her deepest fear struck its way into her heart.

Nothing scared Tabitha more than the sight of blood. Even the slightest cut displayed openly in her presence made her retch violently. As a consequence, you would think that the scenario designed to reflect her greatest fear would feature it promptly. And you would be right.

Abruptly, without warning, Tabitha was left alone in the room she had just entered, as the people she had just conversed with had suddenly vanished. It was then that she noticed the object in front of her, and, despite her better judgment, her hand reached for the sheet that was covering the object, and she pulled it off….

It was not so much one object as several, for she was confronted with a variety of body parts, recently severed from their bodies, all spurting more blood than was humanly possible from wounds that could not possibly still fresh. That latter aspect was confirmed as well when the largest part of the assemblage, a hollowed out head, grew considerably larger than Tabitha herself and began dwarfing her and the room. Blasphemies screamed out of its mouth as it targeted Tabitha directly, and it shouted that she was a worthless girl and wouldn't amount to anything because she couldn't stand the sight of blood.

"NO!" Tabitha shouted back. "You're WRONG! I'll make something of myself- and you'll just all crumble into DUST like the MONSTERS you are!"

Then the head parted its jaws, and seemed to swallow Tabitha up whole, all the while continuing to curse and damn her…..

Tabitha sprang up from the chair and ran out of the tent, fully intending to race all the way home and hide under her bed for an indefinite period of time. Only the strong arms of Lee McGregor stopped her, and only those arms shaking her on a nearby park bench to which they guided her were

able to fully snap her out of the catatonic state the enforced dream had placed her in.

"You see?" Lee asked Tabitha when the latter had fully calmed down. "We were up against something big, and we couldn't deal with it!"

"Yes," Tabitha concurred as she adjusted her glasses onto her face. "It's something big, all right."

They got up and started walking away from the carnival atmosphere around them, for they needed quiet surroundings to fully think about and try to understand what had happened to them. That- and figure out what they could do, if anything, to attempt to expose the vicious charlatan who had done such damage to their psyches. Once they were a safe distance from overhearing ears, they began devising a plan.

"We *have* to do something quick, Tab!" Lee said. "If that crazy….whatever-it-is isn't stopped right away, some poor fellow's gonna have a major league meltdown that'll leave him fit for nothing for the booby hatch. You saw yourself what it did to us- and we aren't exactly normal girls, either!"

"Exactly," responded Tabitha. "But we can't let the authorities know about this. They'd only get in the way."

"Yeah," Lee agreed. "They always louse things up, anyway. But what exactly can we *do*? It seems to be as smart as you, and it's probably as strong as I am with all that mental energy welled up inside of it so, even if either of us were to engage in a fair fight, things wouldn't work. I just don't know…."

"But I do," interrupted Tabitha.

"I thought you would," said Lee, who had fully expected her to say that and was merely setting Tabitha up for a discussion with her last sentence. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, as far as I know, this thing is a collector of other people's inner fears. It seems to feed on the deepest secrets we have in our subconscious minds and then spits them back out to us in the form of those induced comas we underwent. That is a very powerful tactic. If this thing were to somehow hook itself into the primal fears of one particularly fearful person, or even a small group of intelligent people who just happened to have deep-set anxieties about something or other, they could project those thought beams to such an extent that they could overwhelm this world and kill us all off in the process!"

"I coulda told you that. But what are we going to do to stop it?"

"Well, we know someone who has fears the way you have muscles and I have grey matter. And if we were to, say, expose his little army of phobias to that elaborate hook-up, we could override the electronic equipment that The Mysterious Stranger is using to conceal its activities and thus be able to expose the truth about it when the system blows."

"I didn't see any electronic equipment," Lee said densely. "Where was it?"

"Behind the curtain where it was hiding, twit!" Tabitha remonstrated.

"Oh," said Lee. "So are we going to talk to him about it?"

"Of course," answered Tabitha. "There's no other way of doing this. It has to be done- and only by him."

"What if he won't do it?" Lee said.

"Then we'll have to persuade him," said Tabitha in a state-the-obvious way. "Or rather, *you,* being the more physically powerful of us, will have to do it."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Lee answered.

It wasn't long before Lee and Tabitha found themselves in front of a certain door of a certain house at which a certain boy lived. The very boy they had just been speaking of, and the one they hoped would provide the solution to the problem of the person-or thing- who had violated their brains and likely might violate others if they didn't ask soon.

One only had to look at Terry Tetrazini as he nervously traversed the streets of his home town to see that he had a serious problem. This short, blond-haired young man, at the same boundary between youth and adulthood as his friends Lee and Tabitha, suffered from what is commonly known as pant phobia, literally the fear of everything or nearly everything the sufferer comes in contact with. As a consequence, Terry was a near recluse, except for necessities like going to school, where his fearful manner about much of his surroundings made him the butt of literally hundreds of jokes. In spite of this, however, Terry had gradually learned to deal with his handicap to the point that there were some things that he was *not* afraid of, although for the time being, those things were few and far between. In his age group, he was a virtual pariah, target for the greatest of scorn, though in solitude he had sharpened a ready wit that proved to be a reasonably solid defense against his enemies. Nevertheless, he was rarely

seen socially outside of school hours without being accompanied by Lee and/or Tabitha, who were the only ones of their kind who seemed to tolerate and even indulge him in expressing himself emotionally, something that other boys his age would never remotely think of allowing themselves to do.

The window blinds on the door of the Tetrazini house were not drawn, as was common when Terry was home so he could protect himself from outside threats. They only parted slightly when Lee knocked harshly on the door, a secret code between them that meant Terry was wanted. Acknowledgement of this fact came when Terry looked out briefly and shut the blinds again. Then, he opened the door, where Lee and Tabitha looked at him ruefully, something like two police officers going through the motions of busting a house owner for disturbing the peace due to a noisy and disruptive party being held at their domicile.

"What, guys?" Terry asked when they did not give him an immediate response.

"You," Lee said without formalities, pointing to him and then outside with her finger. "Out. Now."

Not wanting to risk Lee's wrath, which he was well acquainted with both directly and indirectly, nor Tabitha's scolding tongue, for the same reason, Terry quickly exited the doorway, making sure to lock the door and place the key securely on his person first.

"We need your help," Tabitha said by way of explaining what they wanted.

Terry let out his little limited chortle of a laugh. This was something he never expected would happen. It was usually the case that Lee and Tabitha would have to help him deal with one of the myriad number of things that caused him to panic for no reason. And sometimes, it would spiral into *all* of them panicking, especially if it involved the presence of insects and blood, the two girls' biggest fears, along with whatever Terry had a concern for at that moment. No, more often than not, it was Terry who required the girls' assistance, since they were perfectly capable of caring for themselves. But this? This was new. So new that he barely believed it.

"What the hell are you *laughing* about, Tetrazini?" Lee growled threateningly. "This is *serious*, dude!"

"Sorry," answered Terry, sobering up. "I just find it hard that you want *my* help instead of the other way around."

“But we *do* need your help, Terry,” replied Tabitha. “There’s just no other way around this problem. You’re the only one of us kids who knows enough about this particular thing to help us with this problem related to it. Of course, if you don’t *want* to help us, that’s your business, but if you don’t help us, a lot of innocent people are going to get hurt.”

“Who said I didn’t want to help you?” responded Terry archly. “You always tell me to toughen up, but when I do, you think I overdo it as much as I do my fears.”

“Can we get on with this, please?” said Lee impatiently. “Or are we going to just let that calcified zombie creature in the back of the tent…”

“Stop exaggerating, Lee!” Tabitha cautioned. “We don’t want to scare him!”

“Z-Zombie?” Terry stuttered frantically as his skin turned a ghastly shade of white.

“Thanks a lot!” said Tabitha *sotto voce* to Lee, who simply grunted in return. Then Tabitha spoke calmingly to Terry to bring him back down to Earth.

“Look, Terry,” she said, “you know more about being afraid of things than anyone else we know. The thing is, there’s this mind reader at the carnival this year who made Lee and I very scared. Whoever or whatever it is, it seems to be able to probe inside of a person’s mind and tap into its inner fears. That way they’re able to broadcast them in front of you as if you were experiencing them yourself, for real.”

“And you want me to go and see this person and undergo this mind probe thing, *because*?” Terry questioned as his face blanched once again.

“*Because* nobody knows more about fears and phobias than you, Mr. Tetrazini!” said Tabitha cuttingly, playing with a vixen-like cunning on his masculine pride. “And this….creature claims that it knows more about them than *you* do! Are you going to just hide in here and let it steal your gift, or are you going to defend your honor and help us get rid of this monster?”

“You’re right!” said a suddenly unafraid and bold Terry. “I *do* know more about fears than some dumb old carnival shrink!” With an aggressive force, he went back to his door, shut it forcefully, locked it and then marched off with military precision, to the shock of Lee and Tabitha. “My honor is at stake, and I must defend it!”

“Nice going,” Lee said to Tabitha softly. “You created a monster.”

“I didn’t *mean* to,” was all Tabitha could say in return. “I just wanted to him to stop being scared for one minute. Maybe I pushed him too far.”

“Are you coming or aren’t you?” Terry demanded after whistling sharply for their attention. They followed him, stunned at how eager he suddenly was to defend his masculine pride.

“Is this the place?” Terry said when he arrived at the tent where Lee and Tabitha had been scared earlier that day, with Lee and Tabitha themselves in tow.

“Yeah,” said Lee, unusually nervous. “But you don’t want to go in there, Ter’. Really, you don’t.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” Terry said. “Tab, you told me yourself that this creep was stealing my thunder. And Lee, you’re always telling me to keep my lip stiff. And today, you start telling me I need to defend my honor, and now you tell me not to risk my neck. Make up your *mind* already!”

“We’re just worried about you, Terry,” Tabitha said. “You know, like we always are. Like friends do for other friends.”

“I know that,” Terry answered. “But can I at least do this one thing on my own without you pushing me into it? I’ve worked pretty hard at trying to make my disability less of a disability, you know. I mean, there’s a lot more people around who have pant phobia than you think. Some have it plenty worse than I do ‘cause they don’t have friends around them who care about them and help them take baby steps every day for dealing with it. Hell, there’s a whole damn group of pant phobia sufferers on Face book, and we have to keep encouraging each other to go out and confront the problems that pant phobia creates for us every day! You don’t want me to let them down, do you? Or let *you* down, after all that good natured needling and teasing you’ve been giving me all this years about my little “problem”? Well, do you?”

“No, Terry,” Tabitha admitted. “You need to deal with this your own way. All we can say in this case is that we brought it to your attention. You have to deal with it the way you want to, even if you get hurt.”

“Wait!” interjected Lee. “I don’t want you getting hurt, Terry. Can’t I go in with you….”

“Relax, Lee,” Terry said, recycling a phrase she had often said to him in the midst of his panics. “You *worry* too much!”

“Oh!” Lee responded sarcastically. “I get it! Ha, ha! Just go ahead and do it if you’re so brave all of a sudden!”

“I will!” Terry flashed suddenly, taking the girls off guard. And, with an unearthly confidence, he entered the tent.

The Rosco fog stung his eyes a little bit, but, by the force of his movements, Terry arrived at the case and chair mostly unscathed.

“Okay!” he barked. “Where’s the creep who says he knows more about fear than me?”

“And *you* would be?” the voice on the P.A. said contemptuously.

“Terry Tetrazini!” he said, identifying himself. “Empanada’s own resident Fraidy Cat! Scared of my own shadow, dogs, spiders, cars, and everything else that’s put in my path! I’ve been constantly scared of things my whole life, and you have the *nerve* to say that you’re better than me at understanding fear! Well, I dare you to do that probe to me and keep your little “business” here intact!”

“You’re pretty confident for a supposed “fraidy cat”, countered the voice. “You sure you’re not putting me on?”

“Mister,“ said Terry, “if I wasn’t so mad about you trying to con me out of my title as the most scared boy in America, I would’ve had a heart attack just *entering* this place!”

“Fine”, responded the voice. “Let’s do this. I have some other clients coming and…”

“When?” questioned Terry. He thought that only Lee, Tabitha and himself had foolishly entered the tent that day, since the girls had observed next to no other business there besides themselves.

“Just sit down and let me get this over with, blondie!” snapped the voice.

Terry obeyed. A portent of what was to come was his getting scared merely when the practitioner began to put the metal gloves, which Terry mistook for the gauntlets of a haunted ghost-knight, to his temples to begin the process. However, his screaming was stopped abruptly- and only temporarily- by one of the gloves being rotated 360 degrees in order to stuff one of the metal fingers in his mouth, just to shut him up.

The visualization process and the emergence of his avatar was next, but nothing else would be the same after that. For, as soon as Terry was ensconced in his dream world, pure chaos ensued. He began to see and

experience everything that he feared, all at once. And his list of fears and dreads was considerably longer than theirs, as would be expected. Almost immediately, the room was full of fearful things as imagined by Terry, from the satanic to the mundane, from demons from Hell to innocent face painted clowns. Terry's reaction to this circus of horrors, both in the context of his dream and in "real" life as well, was sheer and utter panic.

"THEY'VE COME FOR ME!" he bellowed. "ALL OF MY TORMENTORS, ALL AT ONCE! WELL, THIS TIME YOU'RE NOT TAKING ME WITHOUT A FIGHT!"

Still in a trance, he got up from the box and pulled the gloves out of their sockets, creating a small shower of sparks as he threw them at his invisible opponents. Then, in spite of his limited size and strength, he severed the box itself from the invisible electric cables it was bound to on the shadowy other side of the tent, and threw it up in the air and then on the ground. Hundreds of dollars worth of electrical cabling and reinforcements inside the stainless steel box exploded all at once and caused the burlap casing of the tent to catch on fire. As did the temper of the proprietor, who promptly broke character in the back of the tent and screamed at Terry with a curse-laden inflective dialect.

"So that's the way you want it, huh, you little *demon*?" said a still entranced Terry, mistaking the proprietor for one phobia he had only recently conquered, that of the underworld of Hell. "Well, you won't get me that easily!"

He lunged at the shadowy creature behind the other side of the tent, but only crashed into the remainder of the electronic equipment at the other side of the tent. The building came off its limited moorings and exploded into an inferno of flames.

Lee and Tabitha rushed into the blazing tent. It took several minutes to find him, but once they had located Terry they quickly retrieved him-along with the body of the proprietor, whom he had cornered and wrapped in a piece of burlap for "safe keeping".

"So," Lee said to Terry as soon as the group was away from the threat of the fire, "you mind telling us what happened?"

"Actually," said Terry, "I think *she* can do that better than I could." He pointed to the burlap covered body beside him.

"She?" Tabitha asked. "What do you mean, she?"

“He means exactly *that*, jackass!” responded the body, who broke its burlap covering and revealed itself to be Clytemnestra Martinez!

The jaws of the girls dropped, rendering them speechless. This gave Cly her opportunity. Retrieving a hefty dagger from her pocket, she grabbed a horrified Terry and pointed it at his throat.

“Either of you make one false move,” Cly warned the girls, “and I stick him like a pig!”

“What the hell, Cly!” Lee finally snapped. “You run away from home, don’t talk to us for a year, and come back doing this shoddy trick act! What the hell is your *game*?”

“You owe us an explanation, Clytemnestra,” added Tabitha, “especially for all the trouble you’ve been causing!”

“SHUT UP!” Cly roared, waving the blade threateningly at the girls before returning it to Terry’s throat. “I’ll tell you, but you keep your mouths SHUT while I do it. Otherwise, Mr. Douche Bag Scaredy-Cat here GETS IT!” The girls were in no position to argue, and so they listened.

“It was the three of you that made my life a living hell last year,” Cly said bitterly. “Sure, everyone else gave me hell, too, for a variety of things, but it was always *you three* that made me hurt the most. You, McGregor, you couldn’t never leave me alone. You poked me around more than the coach did on the field, you and that determination of yours to win at all costs. Those damn fucking noogies of yours didn’t help matters, neither! Why the hell couldn’t you accept the fact that I weren’t going to be not as good as you as an athlete? And, especially, why couldn’t you stop treating me like your girlfriend? Just ‘cause I’m short and you’re big, you thought you could boss me around, huh? So that’s one reason why I left. The same thing goes for you and the books, Kroger. You wanted to me to be such a brain like you that it made my head hurt! I ain’t no natural scholar, either, but you couldn’t accept it no more than McGregor could! And then, there was *you*, Tetrazini! Just ‘cause we were locker neighbors and all didn’t mean I was interested in you *whatsoever*! And yet, you kept buttinskying your way towards me, thinking you had a chance of getting lucky. And not *one* of the three of you helped me when I needed it the most! ”

She then proceeded to tell them all about the carnival, Professor Joshi, and how she had spent a delightful season “conning the mugs” with her powers of the mind. That is, until they got to Empanada.

“I wanted you all,” Cly growled, “big time. And I got it from McGregor and Kroger. I know what they’re scared of , and I can steal off them forever ‘cause of it. But you, Tetrazini, you’re too much of a risk for my biz, ‘cause you’re scared of everything and you wrecked my business ‘cause of it. You gotta DIE!”

She raised the blade of her dagger towards Terry’s neck, only to be stopped by Lee’s strong arm, which held Cly in check

“Not if *we* have anything to say about it, you scheming BITCH!” she roared.

“Just TRY to STOP me!” roared Cly.

Punching Lee hard in the stomach, so hard that she fell to the ground, Cly desperately grabbed the dagger and held it out for defense as Tabitha and Terry began to close in. But instead of reaching out to try and stab them, Cly took the dagger up, and, uttering a Spanish oath, inserted it into her own body, releasing a torrent of blood. Tabitha screamed and fainted, and Terry yelped as his knees buckled. Abruptly, Lee got to her feet, as Cly’s punch had only slightly weakened her, and taking the unconscious Tabitha’s hand in hers, made a motion to a whitening Terry to follow her.

“Come on!” she said. “She killed herself, and it’s only a matter of time before the creepy crawlies start getting onto her body! I don’t wanna be there when that happens.”

“Nor do I,” added Terry. Regaining his strength, he grasped Tabitha’s other arm, and the trio hustled themselves away from the carnival.

Once they had left the scene safely behind, Clytemnestra Martinez got up, taking the broken plastic bag full of pig’s blood which she had cagily used to fake her death off her person and throwing it away. It would take another year, she resolved, but she would get her revenge on her middle school enemies or die trying. For she had only *begun* to fright!

Confronting The Demon

Ron Koppelberger

Bawd Beam stood his ground in the face of the screaming man. He held onto the wooden branch he had grabbed from the sidewalk with an embracing gambol , it had fallen from one of the old oaks that lined the street. The man screamed, "YOURRRRRRRR CRAPPPPPP, YouRRRRR a friGGGGEEEENNN piece of GARbage……YOU, YOU, YOU are A DEMOOONNNNNN!" his screams reverberated off of Beam in waves of sound.

Beam tensed and gripped the branch tighter. Ravaging the resistance, the man attached a short blade he had been hiding in his long waistcoat to the narrow end of a broomstick he had been waving. The knife clicked perfectly into the tip and he spun the stick in a slow whooshing arc. The setting sun didn't shed any light on the situation and it was senseless in that place and moment of time. Beam had experienced the greater portion of what most considered life and he knew these occurrences would happen every now and again as they had in the past. He thought back to the self-satisfied man who had undressed and donned a black robe in the center of Safety Supermarket last month. He had approached Beam with wild eyes as all of the others had. He had thrown a punch at Beam, in perfect condition for the fight, beam had punched him square in the nose. The robed man had fallen to the floor of the supermarket in a bleeding heap. The police arrived a few moments later. It had been a close call. A 38. Cal pistol fell from the left front pocket of the robe as the police escorted him to their cruiser.

He thought back again to the Wayward Home for the Unsheltered. He had been on his way to his apartment when the homeless man had thrown a clod of dirt at his back, "You sonofabitch!" he had screamed as he stomped and fussed on the crumbling sidewalk. Beam had turned and he had come running full force. Beam stepped aside and the man had tripped falling into the street knocking himself out as he banged his head on the unyielding pavement. Beam had shrugged and moved on. There had been dozens and it seemed as if the madness would continue eternally, maybe it would he thought as the crazed man jabbed at him with the sharp end of the stick, maybe it would.

Beam sidestepped the jab and grabbed the attackers arm twisting it and causing him to scream in panic. The knife wielding man jerked his arm free and ran to the other side of the street. The sun bled spears of red light against the buildings behind the man, outlining the sky in an eerie aura. He was a screaming shadow and a mad happenstance as a few cars rolled between them. He finished yelling and ran around the corner of one of the buildings. Beam didn't wait he simply headed back up the street.

If he thought about his circumstance for more than an instant he might come to the conclusion that a percentage of the world had gone insane, off the wall and rocker both. He knew it didn't make sense yet here he was in that situation over and over again. The repetition was perpetual and the attackers were getting more violent as time went forward. The whisper of an ancient voice filled his head for a moment and he listened to the inner voice cautiously. "You will be tested and the sun shall shine in the way of the inquisitor, the accuser, the aggressor and the thief!" he listened and the whisper became louder until it filled his consciousness. "You will be tested Beam, tested for the strength of the gods and the sake of mankind, tested Beam, Tested." Maybe he was crazy, maybe the voice he was hearing wasn't real, of ethereal smoke and crazed illusion, Maybe it just wasn't.

Beam rubbed his forehead as he walked and it came away sandy, gritty with the sweat of a thousand battles fought and won, "…a test…" the voice continued, "…a test."

Beam moved to the far end of the block and neon lit the sidewalks in an evanescent glow. The signs on main street lit the night and he felt their warmth, their invitation to distraction. The sky was a haze above part smoke and part foggy illusion. Twinkling stars where are you he thought as he starred up into the night.

He paused for a moment and read the sign "HOODAAS GOODS!" it was a convenience store and like the other signs this one glowed a neon welcome. Welcome to the other side, welcome to the Hotel California, Welcome to closed doors and crazed killers welcome, welcome, welcome. He looked inside the front entrance and all seemed calm. There was a clerk behind the counter counting lottery tickets and drinking a Gatorade. A fan blew cold air from the open door into the street and it smelled like hot dogs and potato wedges. Seems safe he said to himself as he walked through the front door.

What looks and what is he thought as he saw the woman in the floor. She was waving her arms back and forth as she lay in the floor almost as if making snow angels. "Hello baby." she said looking up at him from the dirty tiled floor.

She looked familiar, his wife……his girlfriend he wasn't sure. She blew him a kiss and he almost grinned when he saw the clerk. He was a greenish cast and his nose was bleeding profusely. The droplets of blood were pouring from his nose and down his chin. "SONOFABITCH!" he screamed in some unidentifiable accent. Beam took in a deep breath, grabbed a Twinkie from one of the display racks and hurried back out the door.

As he made his way back to his apartment he thought for a moment. Maybe the book had been real, the one he had used months ago, eons ago……he had believed that it was foolishness but nevertheless things had changed after he read the spell from the book of incantations. Maybe it had been real, maybe a gate had opened somewhere…he wasn't sure but the solution wasn't apparent. Maybe he could find the spell, the book again and work it out, maybe he had changed things permanently, he still wasn't sure.

The night wore on and Beam made it back to his little apartment in one piece. He found the book of Black Magic Spells in the back of a kitchen cupboard. He had placed it there after smashing a cockroach with it, in fact the cockroach was still dead and still beneath the book. Grabbing the book he leafed through the pages.

The next day came and Beam ventured out into the world again. People passed him on the sidewalk and the blur of busy cars raced by him. Maybe he had done it, maybe the world was as it should be again.

There was a commotion in front of him something big moving down the street. As it became clearer he realized he hadn't improved the situation he had made it worse.

There was a giant man in red flannel stomping up the sidewalk. Each footfall broke the concrete path and amazingly the people around him didn't seem to notice. He passed a policeman who patted the man on the arm and said, "Hey Skip." Skip grunted and a belch of fire issued from his mouth. Beam paused for a moment and crossed the street away from the giant and the prospect of dieing.

The sky was a brilliant blue nearly cloudless and the dawn sang her rhythm with the horizon. Beam paused hearing the ancient voice again, "Prepare for the first test of will Beam, Prepare." Beam sighed and resigned himself to the idea that this set of circumstances was not going to abate.

He went back to his apartment and grabbed the book again, the next spell read,

"Misstep mistake of this I partake,
Let it be true to the wind and
The sky, I'll do it or try, by the saints
We sigh, by tears and by seams and everything in
Shadow, by all in dark, this weave like the bark
Of a dog in hunt and a flicker of hope,
Let the sun be seen by the souls that seem
To be haunting the world in song
And spite to win the fight, the door saith the light and the
Best of what might!"

Beam lay down on the gray worn sofa, there were bare patches where the cloth had worn through but it was still comfortable. He slept and he dreamed.

He was in the desert searching for something elusive, unbidden and magic. The sky was burnt orange and amber as he walked across the dry desert floor. The air was hot and motionless as secret waves of whispering rite coursed through him. Beam yielded to the heat and took out his canteen. He unscrewed the cap and tilted the bottle to his parched lips. The liquid was warm and coppery, suddenly he realized what it was…blood, thick and viscous. He spit and a gob of red splattered against the dry sand in a tiny plume of dust. He wiped his lips vigorously and the side of his palm came away crimson stained. In the distance a coyote howled and barked at the approaching storm clouds that had mysteriously appeared on the horizon. Beam listened and the coyote quit howling instead there was a sound like rolling thunder and explosive plodding reverberations moving closer to him from the distant hills of sand. The horizon grew dark and a few lightening bolts lit the sky as a figure appeared. It was huge, as large as a ten story building. Beam hid behind a nearby boulder and waited with express terror as the giant approached.

It had several clumps of long black hair hanging from around it's waist, he could see what the hair was attached to…heads, giant heads three or four of them hanging from its belt. The black hair from the severed heads waved and floated across the sky casting a flittering shadow across the sand like dancing snakes. The figure suddenly turned and looked to the western horizon. It hesitated for a moment and moved in that direction as Beam awoke to the sound of crashing thunder and raindrops pounding against the living room window.

The book lay in a puddle of Chocolate milk he had spilled while thrashing in his sleep. "Dammit!" he said as he grabbed the book and wiped it on the couch. The last few pages were saturated with the chocolate and some of the ink was smeared. He looked out the window as flashes of bright headlights moved up and down the street beneath. It was getting dark out and it was raining in a miserable drizzle. He thought the likelihood that the new spell had worked was in dissent with reality and what it was at this point.

Beam changed cloths and threw an overcoat on as he prepared to go out into the night toward the unknown. He was on the sidewalk outside of the apartment building a few moments later. He looked up into the dimming sky and saw streaks of indigo and the soft glow of the surrounding city lights. Warm droplets of rain beaded against his skin and rolled across his checks; he wiped his brow and ran his fingers through his hair. The rain felt good and it reminded him that he was still with the world, hoping for a second he thought about the spell book, maybe the new spell had worked.

He began to walk toward the business district with the intention of stopping by a shopping court to pick up a few things when the sound of screaming filled the air in bellowing belches. The air around Office Depot turned scarlet and emerald for a moment as the shadow of a tall man appeared in the doorway. He was screaming and throwing bundles of paper into the street, next came an office chair and finally a filing cabinet. Beam approached the scene cautiously. He left muddy footprints on the blank sheets of typing paper that littered the sidewalk.

"YOUUUUUUUUUU……." the man screamed pointing at him. Beam tried to figure out what was wrong with the man, something about his face didn't seem right. He moved into the soft sodium glow of the streetlights and in a moment of shocked realization Beam understood what was wrong with the crazed man. He screamed again,

“YYYYOOOOUUUUUU WILL PAYYYYYYY!” Beam watched as the tiny pair of lips rolled and shouted from the center of the man’s forehead, he had paused for a moment to brush the hair away from his mouth, it was hanging in stringy clumps across what should have been his forehead. His eyes were tiny black orbs on either side of his head, close to his ears like an insect a grasshopper or a praying mantis. Giant brown wings opened on his back and they flapped making a buzzing sound for a moment. He screamed again, “YOOOUUUUUU will pay!” his voice trailed off to a whisper as he cocked his head seeming to listen to something in the distance. A car honked in the street and the exhaust from a passing truck filled the air with the smell of diesel. Suddenly he rose in the air as his wings gave him flight. His mouth opened and a long sharp stem pushed from between his lips almost like a bees stinger or maybe a mosquito. He flew at Beam fast and he only had a second to respond. Grabbing the stinger he swung with full force. The man was impossibly light in the air and flew in a smooth arc toward an oncoming car.

The car screeched to a halt but the car had done its duty smashing the maniac to a pulp against the silver front grill of the car. Obviously the confrontations hadn’t ended and they were still after him in the form of monsters and crazed monsters at that. Why were they angry he asked himself in confusion, why were they attacking him? Were they afraid, was it a case of mistaken identity or was it just the Damn book, the incantation that had started it all.

His pupils dilated and hunger aspired to move him away from the accident toward equilibrium, sustenance and a full stomach. Clarity explained the threadbare existence he was shouldering with a perpetual quest for reassuring bondage, slavery to the dollar, the next buck in his wallet. He had .53 cents in his wallet. Dank air drifted in waves from the sewer grate he was standing on. Tapping his pocket he clicked of the amount , “Fifty-three Cents.” he said aloud to himself. Dreadful waves of fear overwhelmed him in a veil of silent darkness.

Excerpts from *Lily's Odyssey*

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Eric Hoffer Award in Best New Writing.

Carol Smallwood

Before I washed the dishes, I called the telephone company about the static on my phone and I was given seven options; I pressed one and got disconnected. I didn't want to hear anymore of "Joy to the World" so I slammed the phone. I saw one of Kitty's hairs on the counter and remembered the hair growing from a mold on Laura Spencer's chin at the funeral—how Chuck Belleborne's jutting head gave him a turtle look—how Marguerite Hull's sparse eyelashes and vacant smile encouraged Uncle Walt to say she had "nothing upstairs"—how Henry LeFebvre wore his long hair tied back in a rubber band, "like some damn Hippie," Uncle Walt had said. How Ben Whitworth's shoes squeaked.

Did they make white shoe polish anymore? The kind with the brush that is a part of the cap? I was brought up when white shoes were worn between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and if any female appeared in them a day earlier or later, people shook their heads happy with the thought none in their family would do such a thing. Come spring, I thought, when the ground was soft, Uncle Walt would be buried. I dreaded going through it again.

The water circling down the drain made me think of a rescue worker on a television documentary I'd seen. He'd said when a person falls between a passing train and a train platform, the body gets twisted like a corkscrew from the ribs down. When they're moved, they die because their guts fall out. When accidents like that happen, workers call their relatives, after telling the victims they'll have one or two minutes to live after being moved.

Dead, all dead. Cal, Uncle Walt, Dr. Schackmann.

I'd told Dr. Schackmann, "When I was growing up, I got rid of the ugliness of things by going outside. Even in the worst snowstorms, I've never felt the loneliness I've felt around others."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, and remembered listening to cowbells near my grandfather's place while spider webs hovered over the

grass like lace. Each acre had a different look and feel as if guarded by a different pagan spirit, and the breeze carried with it the mystery of things only glimpsed in childhood. As a child, I'd sensed that every insect, leaf, cloud was one with something larger. Light, air, scent, and sound healed whatever was hurting, and I saw blue birds flying as if they were loosened fragments of sky. It was in my grandfather's fields my ashes would be scattered; hoping to copy Antaeus, I'd gain renewal by touching Mother Earth.

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I left the store singing, "Lit--tle run--ning steps will make the way, and quick--ly run away" so I wouldn't hear a meowing cat or barking dog: the fear of abandoned animals was always waiting like a Greek chorus. I saw the stones in the winding brook in my Thompson piano book with its shiny red cover I tried hard not to tear. When I played the *Evening Prayer* from the second act of "Hansel and Gretel" (Hansel and Gretel were lost in the forest) I remember my teacher saying I'd put a lot of expression in it; the extra packets of salt, catsup, syrup from McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King, were comforting—maybe I kept them like crumbs to find my way out of the forest. When people smiled and commented, "Are you a choir director?" or "I thought you were on a cell phone" I'd beam a smile. Humming had become so automatic I had to think why people commented.

When I entered McDonald's, a white-haired employee greeted me with, "You made it again! Young lady I'm proud of you." I didn't know if it was his job like a Wal-Mart greeter or if he was just friendly. I smiled, replied, and went to order. When I heard him say the same thing to someone else, I knew it was another older woman--only she looked much older than the woman I saw in my mirror: I didn't know if I liked being called a young lady or not. Still, I wouldn't need to ask someone what time it was to convince myself I wasn't invisible.

McDonald's seemed like the village wells of earlier days: retired men talking over coffee, salesmen reading *USA Today*, young parents welcoming the playroom and Disney toys, teens seeking each other. Once when I was eating my Big Mac Meal, I saw an elderly couple that'd brought tears to my eyes: the woman carried the tray and soon as they were seated she spread paper napkins on the table like they were linen. She then served a wrapped

hamburger and Styrofoam cup of coffee to the man, and bowed her head. He joined her by folding his hands to say grace. They both had such expressions of perfect peace and simple contentment I envied them a great deal.

I noticed the pre-holiday edge in the air: people's uneven movements betraying frayed nerves, whining children off schedules, women tense and irritable from juggling a job and family while preparing a *Good Housekeeping* Christmas, men glancing at their watches. I was grateful I'd gotten my Christmas cards done and presents wrapped, but the more I did ahead of time, the more I did additional baking and decorating.

There was a table with children and adults not far from me--probably a grandmother, daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. The grandmother looked worried and never said a word but you could tell they cared for her. Her daughter and some of the kids had eyes like hers. The children were fresh-cheeked with dark hair and one had braids bound with rubber bands, reminding me how Aunt Hester would mutter, "Jesus, Mary, Joseph!" when I'd wiggle and cry when my hair was pulled--but braiding wasn't as bad as having my hair rolled tightly in metal curlers Saturday nights for church. The daughter's husband had green eyes.

I remembered a dream of a man with green eyes and hairy legs telling another man that he had his daughter often. The other man grinned and compared his daughter with what his friends had said about theirs. I felt repulsed but at the same time assured because it was so common. My eyes were the green of Uncle Walt's and I wondered what color eyes Oedipus had before gouging them after realizing he'd married his mother.

A woman at the table behind me, kept saying in a boisterous voice, "I had no clue," then give a loud irritating laugh and ask, "Would you believe it?" I knew what the loud woman look like before I turned to glare at her. Her resentful eyes kept resting on a man wearing a hat like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with eyes only for a woman next to him. There was a tabloid between them: "Queen Elizabeth I Found Alive in Greenland Love Nest" with pictures of Sir Walter Raleigh--both of them in seventeenth century clothes. At another table a girl was showing another teenage girl her belly button ring saying, "It tickles when I wash."

In the parking lot a shopping bag jerked like a puppet on invisible strings before disappearing under a car. Another sailed by until it quivered at a curb. I'd once seen a mouse quiver like that. I wasn't sure if a mouse

was inside a large plastic container but Kitty's vigilance made me wonder so I lifted a tin of Christmas fudge inside the container, afraid it may not be able to get out. It was near a bag of cookies and I replaced the tin in surprise. It must've moved because when I raised the tin I saw it quiver a few times and be still. With much guilt, I slid it out of the can on the snow hoping it'd only been stunned and wouldn't let myself look at it again like when I forced myself not to remember Uncle Walt's bending over me in dreams, grinding my teeth trying to forget screaming, "NO, NO, NO!" The kids would say the next morning, "Gee Mom, you screamed like you were being murdered," so I knew I actually had.

It would soon begin to get dark--I didn't like to be out then because it was when strays prowled. I remembered descending in a plane after one of my job interviews and seeing a security light making a circle of light in the darkness, and how it'd made me ache for the security of home. I tried to discern purpose in the clouds through the car window but they kept forming different shapes, stacking in layers, and then escaping as wisps to form different shapes to layer again. The road was called 50W or 50E depending on the direction you were going.

Dead Wrong

Craig Faustus Buck

I sense that I'm alive before I become fully consciousness. I'm lying on my back. I try to lift my hand, but it won't move. I can't see it over my torso, so I try to lift my head. I can't lift that either. I try each leg. I can feel the muscles straining but they seem to be tied down. Then my eyes finally focus enough to see some sort of strap across my chest. My extremities must be strapped down, too. What the hell?

I can see my breasts, nude below the strap. They block my view of the rest of my body. Why are they bare? I don't feel any clothes. Am I fully naked? Why am I strapped naked to a table?

A man comes into view. Oh my god! He's got something over his face! Why is he trying to hide his identity? Wait, that's a good sign. If he doesn't want me to be able to recognize him, maybe he doesn't mean to kill me. But who is he? Why am I here? How did I get here?

His eyes peer over his mask. I once saw a man die of a heart attack on the street and his lips turned the same blue as this man's eyes. They're death blue, cold, humorless and frighteningly distant like he's in a trance. He's staring at my naked breast, transfixed. A shiver of fear runs through me.

My thoughts won't gel no matter how hard I try. No answers, just questions, the same ones looping over and over in my head. He must have given me some drug. I try to speak, but there's something in my mouth. Why would he gag me? What does he want? What is he going to do to me?

A vague recollection swims into my mind. A parking lot. Underground. Dark. Quiet. I shake off the thought because he's saying something and I want to hear. But my ears are ringing. I just catch a fragment of what he says.

"… a little slice," he says. "Just enough." Enough? To what?

He holds up something shiny. Some sort of knife! One of those thin-handled hobby knives with the razor-sharp blades! He admires its mirrored surface. I try to spit out the gag to scream, but it holds firm. I struggle against my bonds but they don't budge either.

"Lie still," he says. "I don't want to give you more drugs. I want to keep you awake. This won't hurt a bit."

He's got his hand on my breast! Oh God, he's playing with it. What's he doing with the knife? Oh no! Please, God! Please, God! Please, God! I guess the drugs are controlling the pain, but I can feel the pressure of the blade!

He raises his hands and they're covered in blood! He's holding a piece of my flesh! What has he done to me?

Then it hits me. Masked or not, this man is going to carve me up, piece by piece. I feel my tears rolling across my cheeks and into my ears. He's going to make me slowly bleed to death!

I start bawling and it makes me choke on my gag.

"All done," he says. "We'll pull out your breathing tube and you can go home as soon as the anesthesia wears off."

Plaything

Wendy Schmidt

January, 1929

“Love that jazz!" Norma squealed in delight as she kicked up her heels and took another sip from the small, silver flask she'd hidden in her garter. "Whoopee!"

It was 1929 and the Remus family was holding a large gathering for little Maybelle's tenth birthday. The house was decorated in the flamboyant decor of the newly rich, or bootleg ritz as the old money snobs liked to say. A seven piece jazz band had been hired to play. Presents were stacked to the ceiling. Everyone was doing the Charleston, Lindy Hop and Toddle. Free flowing fruit punch, Ginger Ale, Pepsi-Cola and Maybelle's favorite, Orange Crush, quenched the thirst of the lively dancers. For, even though the family was, in the business, Mrs. Remus did not allow alcohol in her home until after the children were put to bed and sleeping soundly.

"Norma! Stash that flask this instant or you'll be tossed out on those fancy heels!" Rose warned. Her worried eyes darted around the room to see if anyone else had noticed. She knew her sister could lose control under the influence.

"Aren't we gettin' high and mighty, Wild Rose," Norma teased. "Gentleman George made his fortune filling flasks."

Gentleman George was Rose's husband. The nickname stuck because of his impeccable manners, stylish suits and mastery of the social graces. He managed to maintain a certain respectability and loyalty amongst the cutthroat kings of smuggling and speakeasies. His business had grown steadily and now George and Rose were, rolling in the dough, as Norma often blurted out amidst questionable company.

"What's the beef? I'm drinking some of George's finest." Norma raised the flask and winked one vivid blue shadowed lid. The other eye was hidden under peek-a-boo bangs.

"Norma dear, this is a family party, not a speakeasy," Rose snapped.

Norma laughed and tucked the flask back under the layered fringe of her sequined evening dress, then rolled up a sagging silk stocking. "I get the picture. But, some of these mooks don't look like any cousins I remember."

Rose managed a stiff smile. "George invited a few business acquaintances. It's important for him to socialize with his, partners.

"Yeah, okay. Don't get the heebie-jeebies, Rosey. I'm just up to some of my old tricks. Remember when you were the dish driving all the men goofy. Plenty of pals set their peepers on those gorgeous gams. How do you think ya got the name Wild Rose?"

Rose placed one finger against her lips. "Shhh, keep your voice down. I like to say it's because roses are my favorite flower."

"Well, you ended up with a good egg and a family business to boot. You know I love our baby girl. Why, I think she's the Bees Knees. I got her the best birthday gift ever."

"It ain't hot is it doll?" Jack Reynolds stepped forward with a large, ornately wrapped box. His face would have been handsome if not for the long scar running down one cheek. He had cold, deep set, grey eyes that always seemed to be on the lookout for trouble.

Norma playfully punched his arm, "Yeah, sure, I nicked it off some mug on the street. Listen, smart guy, I'm a working girl. I actually earned a sawbuck selling malt at George's bakery. I mean, gimme some credit will ya? I bought this pretty thing for Maybelle with my own spinach. Baby's gonna love it."

"Bakery, that's a good one. Whatta they sell, Rum Cake and GIN-ger Cookies? That reminds me, I worked up a thirst lugging that box in from the car. Ya got a tip or two around this joint?" Jack asked.

Norma punched his arm a second time. "Shut yer trap. Rose wants this to be a dry party."

Jack roughly grabbed Norma's wrist. "Who ya think yer punchin', Sister? I'm in the racket too, ya know. Think yer the cat's pajama's, I'll bet? I'd take you down a peg or two right here and now, but I got a lot a respect for Rose so I'll let it pass. How about some java? They got that or do I gotta snatch a kid to ransom a cup a coffee?"

"Get your paws off me!" Norma glared at Jack. She was in danger of going too far again. Last time she'd ended up with a bloody nose. Her angelic face, pale skinned and pink lipped, set off by a halo of platinum blonde finger waves belied the tough girl interior. Still, Jack's threatening manner sometimes frightened her. It was one of the reasons she found him so attractive. She liked dangerous men. "Okay, take it easy, daddy. I'll get you a cup of the stuff."

George had been watching the exchange from across the room. He wondered if Norma had any idea just how vicious her boyfriend could be? Jack had done a stretch in the pen for armed robbery and beating a guy unconscious. Goons on the street said he was a hatchet man for the mob. And the mob, took care of it's own. That's why he was sprung a little earlier then most.

"How's tricks, Jack?" George asked.

"Can't complain," Jack replied as he lit a cigarette. "Got some dough in my pocket and a new deck of Luckies. How's the jiggle juice flowin'?"

George smiled. "Don't know what you mean? We own a perfectly legitimate business."

"Yeah?" Jack asked. "Cause I hear yer runnin' a pretty swanky clip joint over on Broad Street, chiseling some real high class twists and trigger boys at your place. Some of the gumshoes lay down a pair a night for them girlie cocktails and a dinner show. Impresses the Dumb Dora's they date.. Yer the Big Cheese around town and down at the clubhouse, pal."

"The show has been well received by critics and cops alike," George replied, with the cool look of a man who had everything under control. "Why don't you come by with Norma sometime. She's got too much class to be hanging out at those dives you frequent. Drinks will be on the house."

Jack gave George a menacing look and flipped his cigarette onto the beautiful marble floor then crushed the spent butt under one shiny black shoe. "You leave Norma to me. That dame's in it for a good time and I got the scratch to show it to her. She's hooked on hooch and hittin' the pipe, habits that don't come cheap or happen in some ritzy night club. She likes things a little down and dirty. But, Norma sure can look swell. See those earrings she's wearin'? Real nice ice. Them ain't no two bit ringers neither. Gave her a pearl handled piece to carry in her purse. Just cause I know how much she likes the feel of a hard heater next to her hip, loaded and ready."

George flinched at the crass sexual innuendo aimed at his sister-in-law.

Jack knew he was getting to the normally unflappable Gentleman George. "Norma takes it rough, ya follow? She's a weak sister when it comes to men, money and trouble."

"I saw the diamonds," George replied, with an edge of anger to his voice. "Must be 5 carats at least. Mind telling me who owned the pair before Norma tried them on?"

A slow sneer spread across Jack's face. It was enough to make George take a step back. "Let's just say, the doll was in a jam and I had to take her for a ride outta town. She won't be needin' jewelry where she's goin'"

At that moment Norma came over with a cup of black coffee. "Here's the joe."

Jack took a swig and grimaced. "Geez, I could get a better cup for two bits at any hash house."

"So, why don't you, then?" Norma sniffed.

"What'd I tell ya about watching that pretty mouth?"

George was about to protest but Norma cut him off. "No need to get sore. Gimme a light will ya, Daddy?" Norma held out a long silver cigarette holder between two well-manicured fingers. "Say, where's the loot? They just cut the cake and I want to give Maybelle her present. Cept, I'd like to do it without the audience, just me and baby."

"Sure, sure," George said. "She'll be going to bed in an hour. You can tuck her in. Though I doubt she'll get much sleep after all this excitement."

"I've got just the thing to settle her down." Norma grinned.

"What'ya gonna do, slip her a Mickey?" Jack quipped.

This time George spat his words out with no hesitation. "Norma, why do you hang around with punks like this? You're too good for him. He's a wrong number. You're gonna get hurt or worse."

Jack held up a fist. "Shut yer yap, Mac or I'll pop you right in the kisser, fancy party or no fancy party." "Try it and Bruno will give you the bum's rush." George indicated a large man standing by the front door with an obvious bulge under his coat.

Rose interrupted the growing disturbance. "Oh, Jack you haven't tried the caviar have you? It's really quite good."

Jack looked confused for a moment. "Caviar?"

"Fish eggs," George replied, flatly. "Cost a fortune."

Jack slapped George on the back. "How much that set ya back, fella. A fortune in fish eggs but I can't get a decent cuppa a joe. What a racket."

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An hour later Norma was tucking Maybelle into a big, beautiful, white iron bed.

"There's enough room for ten of you in this bed," Norma laughed. "When I was little I shared a double with your mommy and we fought over one scratchy wool blanket. You sure are a lucky baby."

The little girl looked sleepy but her eyes were bright as stars."You're so pretty, Aunt Norma. Your hair is all wavy and you've got cupie doll lips. Thats what they call them in mommy's fashion magazine. When I'm grown, I want to look like you." Maybelle touched the diamond jewelry hanging from Norma's ears lobes. "Did your boyfriend give you these?"

"Yep, they're the real thing to. Pretty nice ice from ol' Jackie. Who'd a thought he could be so generous. They sure are heavy though. Kind of make my ears hurt." She removed one and placed it in Maybelle's small hand.

"It's so big and sparkly! It looks like a tiny chandelier, like the kind hanging in the dining room"

"It does at that. We both like sparkly things, don't we? And look, the diamonds are surrounded by blue sapphires. They remind me of the violets in my mother's garden."

"When you visit your mommy you should bring her sapphires. I bet she'd like that."

Norma laughed. "Your grandma doesn't think much of my taste in jewelry or boyfriends. She's kinda old fashioned that way. Hey, I've got something that you might like. Thought I'd give it in private, before I leave."

"Are you going away, Aunt Norma?" Maybelle asked.

"No, baby, no I just … . Your old auntie likes to have a good time. I love to dance and drink and flap my cap all over town. And I guess I was just thinking, I won't always be around when you need me. So, here is a friend that will keep you company until I come back."

Norma placed the box next to the little girl.

"But, I don't want you to go anywhere. I want you to stay here."

"Sure ya do, honey. But I can't stick around all the time, right? I mean I'm a pretty, fresh tomato. Got lots of swell fellas to meet and flivver's to seat. Who knows, 1929 might be a banner year for ol' Norma. Maybe I'll find my prince and live in a castle. Go on, open it."

Maybelle lifted the top of the box and folded back fragile tissue paper. Inside, she found an exquisite doll. Her hair was white blonde with soft waves framing a perfect heart shaped face. Her makeup was done in the current style with vivid blue shadow and pink cupie doll lips. The dropped

waist dress had a fringed hem and sequined bodice. Pinned to the collar was a small beaded brooch in the shape of blue violets.

"Oh, she's so pretty. She looks like you, Aunt Norma."

Norma smiled. "There's a slight resemblance. Guess what her name is?"

"Norma?"

"Ha! That's funny. Nope, her name is Violet. Just like the flowers she's wearing. I always loved that name. If I had a little girl, I'd call her Violet."

"Maybe you will have one and then I can play with her. Violet — I like that. She looks like a beautiful flower," Maybelle said, as she stroked the doll's hair.

"Yes, she does. She's very special, Baby. Make sure to take good care of her. I want you to think of me every time you hold her close. And, as you fall asleep at night, she'll be right here. Plus, now promise not to tell, she's got a secret." Norma winked then bent to kiss Maybelle's cheek. "Lets tuck you in and I'll set Violet at the end of your bed."

"A secret?" The little girl yawned. "I won't tell anybody. But, you promise not to go until I fall asleep. Okay, Aunt Norma?"

"No baby, I won't. I'll stick around until the sandman comes."

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January 2013

"I want that doll out of this bedroom!" Jack demanded.

Audrey tightened her grip and lightly stroked the blonde waves of soft vintage hair. "Not gonna happen, pal. Violet is mine, now. She's a rare treasure — a 1920s Boudoir Flapper doll. Granny May wanted me to have her. When I was a child, this doll was my constant companion. She kept me entertained for hours."

"I don't care if she performed in silent films with Clara Bow," Jack shouted. "I don't want her in our bedroom."

"But she's tailor-made to sit on a bed."

"She creeps me out!" Jack cried. "I swear to God, last night I saw her open her eye lids."

Audrey laughed. "Are you serious? That's not possible, her eyes are painted on, see? You must have been having a nightmare."

"Nightmare or not she turned her head and winked at me — twice. For a moment I thought I was in a horror film. The thing is spooky as hell, Audrey."

"Maybe she was flirting with you. Didn't you tell me all the girls use to flirt with you during your hound dog days."

Jack grimaced. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Besides, they were living, breathing girls, not inanimate flapper dolls with glass heads. Now how about it?"

"Geez, Jack, it's just a toy. And her head is made of bisque not glass. She's worth quite a bit in this pristine condition. Look at the vivid blue of her eye shadow and her pink rose bud lips. Instead of trashing such an exquisite antique and getting hysterical over it, why don't you try and man up a little. Can't you see how important she is to me?"

Jack clenched his teeth. "Man up! I'll show you man up! I'll pull the biscuit head off its scrawny neck and throw it down the garbage disposal."

"Over my dead body!" Audrey hid the doll behind her back. "Granny May left Violet in my care. Harming her would be like hurting me."

They both stood facing each other, stubbornly holding their ground. Jack knew that Audrey could grab a grudge and run with it for weeks. It wasn't worth the prolonged cold shoulder. He slowly relaxed his body and let out a long sigh.

"Okay, okay, can we just calm down? This is not so hard to fix. Put it in the sitting room instead of the bedroom, so I can sleep in peace. Is that too much to ask?" Jack took a conciliatory step towards Audrey. "I'm sorry baby, I guess I'm not an antique toy fan. I don't quite get your attraction to that thing."

"Try to understand," Audrey pleaded. "Violet was such a comfort after my folks split up. I spent a lot of time at Granny's house. I remember sleeping in her big Victorian bed and hugging Violet so tight. Come on, Jack, don't be a mook. Once you get to know her, you'll like her. She'll charm the pants off you. I know she will. She's the cat's pajamas."

Jack folded his arms in front of his chest. "So, I'm a mook now, am I? I don't know what it means but I sure don't like the sound of it. Okay, here's the deal; the pants stay on and I don't want to get to know her or her cat. I just want to go to sleep without worrying that she'll turn into the Bride of Chucky and kill me in the middle of the night."

Audrey stifled a smile. It was rather amusing to see such a normally cool and collected guy so afraid of a harmless doll. She couldn't resist teasing him a little bit.

"Fine. I'll put her in the sitting room. Will that do? Or would you rather I haul her to the Big House and post a cop outside the door?"

Jack folded his arms in front of his chest. "Tempting, but the sitting room it is and I can do without the smart-ass humor. Thank you very much. I think I've been pretty damned tolerant of all your freaky family stuff, but you neglected to mentioned the doll fetish."

"That family crack's hitting below the belt, pal. And freaky doesn't seem to bother you in the bedroom." Audrey said.

Jack furrowed his brow and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I can be such a beast sometimes."

Audrey reached out to ruffle his hair and winked. "The beast in you comes in pretty handy in the boudoir, baby. But you owe me one. You'll have to doll sit while I'm gone, keep her safe and sound."

"I can hardly wait," Jack groaned. "As long as she stays out of the bedroom and both the doll and you stop winking at me, I guess I can stand it."

They both smiled and embraced one another.

"Friends again?" Jack asked.

"I winked at you didn't I?"

"Funny girl — how about a little less winking and a little more bonking," Jack teased, with a wicked grin on his face.

"God, that was a horrible line considering your famous reputation as a flirt," Audrey laughed. "Whatta ya want, Bogart?" Jack stiffened his upper lip and slid his hand around her waist. "Drop the doll, doll face, and come to daddy."

"I'm hard to get, Jack. All you gotta do is ask," Audrey made a soft purring sound, as she began to unbutton her blouse.

Jack smiled. "I think we've been watching too many old movies."

"Gotta love Bogey and Bacall," Audrey replied, then gave Jack her best come and get it look. "You know what you're getting into slim. It's gonna be rough."

"Hey! That's my line," Jack protested.

Audrey ripped open his shirt and pushed him onto the bed. "I can do both parts."

"Well, what's got into you? The dame wants it rough," Jack growled. "Here's my heater, baby. It's too hot to handle."

"I can handle any piece you're packin', pal. Shut up and shoot."

Jack looked confused for a moment. "You've really stepped up the lingo. You been watching old films without me, Slim?"

"Just comes naturally, I guess. Now drop trow or die."

"Yes, ma'am!"

***

The next morning Audrey was stuffing the last bits of clothing into her overnight bag. Although her grandmother had died months before, some family members had been hard to reach in time for the funeral. A memorial service would have to do for the late comers. It had always made Audrey wonder. Why were her relatives so hard to come by? And, even when they did get together it was oddly uncomfortable.

"Was the family always this, this, I don't know, strange with each other?" Audrey asked Granny May one day.

"We used to be close," May sighed. "But, things seemed to change over the years. It's as if a curse was cast and touched everyone in it's path and everything started to go wrong. Marital problems and money problems plagued us after the depression and the war killed so many young men. My Lillith was to be a comfort but we seemed to clash as soon as she was old enough to talk."

Audrey perched at the end of May's huge white iron bed, as she had done so many times over the years. "What was it like before the crash?"

"The last happy memory I have is of my tenth birthday. Oh my, the house was bright and beautiful and so were the people. Men were bold and dashing and the women were daring and dazzling in their sequined gowns, dripping jewels and donning expensive furs and feather headdresses. And how they danced, into the wee hours of the morning. Though I heard more then saw most of the late parties. Sometimes though, I'd sneak out and watch from the second story staircase. All was glitter and gold and sparkling champagne. Although, my mother only served alcohol after the children were sent off to bed."

"It sounds so wonderful, Granny."

"Oh it was, it was. But then she went away. It seemed like a portend of things to come." May had that faraway look in her eyes again, as if her mind had flown to another time and place. In this state, she seemed to forget that anyone else was there. May would suddenly start talking to long dead relatives and it frightened Audrey.

"Who, who went away?" Audrey asked.

"She promised to return. She promised to tell me her secret."

Audrey found Granny May's spells quite disturbing. The meaning of her words were lost. But, Audrey knew something must have happened to someone much loved long ago. It was difficult to know exactly who or when this took place. Audrey's own mother was estranged from May and had been for years. Lillith never talked of the past or mentioned any family stories. She never even came to visit except on rare occasions and then, refused to stay at the house.

There were fortunes made in less then legal ways. Audrey knew that much. Bootlegging, smuggling, that went on way back in the roaring 20's. She'd managed to ferret out a few of the facts. It was more then that, though, it was as if everyone was keeping secrets about something half forgotten yet still stored in the collective subconscious. But, what?

"My mother never recovered from it. She died a few years later."

Audrey furrowed her brow, "From the crash you mean? Or from George finally leaving her?"

"My father tried to go on. And, he knew how to keep the finances from falling apart completely. We were well cared for. But, mother was beside herself. I barely saw her after my birthday party. She grieved so, blamed herself for not doing more to stop it. If it hadn't been for Violet … "

"Oh Granny, I wish I could help. If only I knew more."

Towards the end, May was bedridden and held tightly to her childhood doll.

"You must take good care of her," she begged Audrey, repeatedly "I promised, it was the last thing we talked about before the sandman came."

Audrey held her grandmother's fragile hand. "Of course I will, But, we never talked about a Mr. Sandman, Granny May. Who is he? Should I try and contact him?"

May peered out into space and brushed her paper fine cheeks against the soft blonde waves of the beautiful Violet. "I promise my darling Norma. I won't let you go."

"Norma? Granny, I'm Audrey."

They were some of the last words May uttered before falling into her final sleep.

Audrey knew of no person by the name of Norma. She could only assume, in her grandmother's confusion, her aging mind was mixing up the past and present.

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The memorial was being held the following afternoon. Jack bowed out, saying he had an important deadline to meet at work. Audrey couldn't help feeling a bit abandoned.

"I hate going alone," she snapped.

"I went to the funeral and it's not as if I ever met your grandmother. Your family will be there for support."

"Small comfort," Audrey sneered. "They won't make it through the ceremony without arguing, especially now that the will has been read. Bunch of moochers. They couldn't care less that May is gone. Lillith will make an appearance and leave quickly as usual. She doesn't care. Do you know she actually told me to sell Violet? She said I should get rid of the cursed thing and if I couldn't sell it to burn it. Those were her exact words. Why does she hate Violet so when she was Granny's prized possession? It's as if my mother wants to take away the only thing left to remind me. All any of them every cared about is getting their mitts on her dough. I wish you had met her, Jack. I begged you to come last Christmas, remember? But you had to attend that swanky office party."

"I can't understand half of what you just said. Mitts on her dough, what does that mean? But, that swanky party led to a substantial promotion."

"So you've pointed out many times. I'm sure flirting with the hostess, helped."

"Not that again — you know I have to get in good with my boss's wife. She's the real power behind that company. Her family is loaded and I've got to make sure she likes me. So I flirt a little, so what? It's all pretty innocent."

"Pretty innocent!" Audrey retorted, "Right — nothing like selling integrity for a little more loot. Don't they have a name for that?"

"Hey, don't throw stones. Didn't you tell me that your grandmother's family made their money in boot legging? I bet Violet could tell some stories."

"She'll keep it clammed, if she knows what's good for her," Audrey hissed.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Did you just threatened your own doll?" Jack laughed.

"That's ridiculous," Audrey sniffed.

"I agree."

Audrey brusquely zipped up her bag. "The point is, everything else take a back seat to you're career, including me. There's more to life then meat and potatoes, Jack. But, I don't want to argue anymore. I'll be back Tuesday. We can talk then." She gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

"Meat and potatoes? I haven't heard that line since my grandparents were alive." Jack said, then held Audrey's face between his hands. "I've only got eyes for you, kid. Don't you know that by now? I can't go with you but I'll be lonely every minute until you're home again and in my arms."

"You'll be fine, daddy," Audrey replied, in a breathy voice. "Just don't go to any clip joints and invite some fresh tomato home."

"You know I don't like tomatoes. What's got into you? I don't like all these odd phrases coming out of your mouth. Are you having a stroke or something?"

"I haven't the faintest idea why I said that. I've been spouting this stuff all week. Must have something to do with Granny May. Call you when I get there, Jack. Gotta shake a leg."

"Ok, I'll play along," Jack took on a gangster stance, "Beat it, Slim and don't worry, I'll go easy on the hooch."

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That evening Jack went out with a few friends after work. It was late, close to 3 am, when he drove home. The house was dark except for a faint light coming from the sitting room. He threw his clothes over a chair and ambled down the hallway in underwear and socks. He popped open a can of beer and switched on the television. Ahh, just like the old dog days. But his eyelids began to droop after only a few minutes.

Jack entered the sitting room and turned off the light. He had a sudden sensation that something was wrong, but shrugged it off and walked into the dark bedroom. He paused at the door. What was eating at him? Then it hit like a cold slap in the face. The doll, she wasn't in her chair. He made a mad dash back to the sitting room. No Violet! He switched the light back on and scratched his head. Where the hell could she be? He turned over cushions and looked under furniture. Damn! The thing couldn't have up and walked away on its own, right? The thought made him feel slightly uneasy, gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Wait, what? When had he ever used those words? Must be Audrey's influence. Come on, Jack, your drunk and feeling guilty is all. Snap out of it! He hated that damned doll. "Violet, ya stupid twist, I'm too tired to play hide and seek."

He sat down, to catch his breath. Stupid twist, that doesn't sound right? I don't even know what that is. I've got to get a grip. Jack poured himself a drink and began to relax. His thoughts wandered through that evening's events. A night out with the boys had been good for him. There'd been a beautiful blonde sitting at the bar, face like an angel, body svelte but curvy. She'd given him the eye several times, even winked. And she kept tossing her hair so that the soft waves fell over one eye, very sexy. Jack imagined the blonde had a rich boyfriend but was looking for a little down and dirty excitement.. He couldn't help notice the expensive silk dress and the impressive diamond earrings dangling from her lobes. She kept grabbing at her purse as if to say, "I'm ready to go anytime you are, baby. Just say the word." He was certainly man enough for her. There was no doubt that she wanted him. It was nice to know he could still attract other women.

"Jesus, Jack, your girlfriend is at a family funeral and you're acting like a stray dog." He could be a real sap sometimes. He loved Audrey. She wasn't flashy like the blonde, but she had a quiet class and impeccable taste and she was the kind of woman who was adventurous in bed, willing to try anything at least once. She was also a woman he could trust. She'd never double cross him.

"I gotta find that doll," he said, then felt anger rise up in his throat. I don't even like the thing and here I got the jitters over it. But, Audrey might think I did this on purpose. She'll give me hell if anything happens to Violet.

Again Jack thought about his phrasing. It was more than a little unnerving. He had the weird sensation that someone else was pulling his strings, putting strange words into his mouth. Same kind of words Audrey was using this morning? He'd commented on it. Something felt off. It wasn't just old movie dialogue. This had a sinister vibe. He shook his head in an effort to clear it but the alcohol had done it's job well.

"Screw this, I've gotta get some shut eye or I'll die."

Jack lay under the cool sheets and felt a current of intense desire strike his body. He began to fantasize about the blonde bombshell in the bar. Seeing her white breast peeking out of that low cut dress, scanning those long legs, catching the quick flash of a smile as her tantalizing eyes teased him to come. Suddenly a female voice filled the room.

"Poor, lonely Jack."

It stopped him dead in his thoughts. "Who said that?"

"Audrey can be such a kill-joy sometimes, when all a guy really needs is a little cash and nookie."

"What the hell is going on?" Jack fumbled to turn on the bedside lamp but knocked it over instead.

"Is Jack ready to play?"

"Audrey? Is that you?"

"Let's put on our glad rags and go out on the town. All we need is some hooch and hot jazz and we'll be flyin' high. Ain't that right, Daddy."

"Cut it out! This isn't funny!" Jack shouted.

"Come on big boy. Violet knows what you need."

The creepy feeling of tiny fingers stroking his arm made him jump half out of his skin. And then, he heard a soft whisper in his ear. "Let's make whoopee."

Jack flew out of bed, tripping on his own feet while desperately trying to turn on the wall switch. The room flooded with light. To his horror he saw blonde waves peeking out from under the sheets. The thing slowly turned to reveal her painted eyes and pouty lips then she winked. "All you have to do is ask," she cooed.

"Violet!" Jack screamed.

"Got a secret I want to tell. Come over here, daddy."

Jack felt another rush of desire and an irresistible sense of curiosity. Was he dreaming, maybe stuck in some kind of half asleep state, where reality and fantasy meet? He moved cautiously towards the bed.

"Don't make me wait too long. See what I've brought for show and tell."

He couldn't stop himself. It was as if the doll was willing him to act. There was a quick glint of something laying next to Violet. Did he dare to move even closer?

"Come on, Jackie. Just look at what Violet's been hiding under her dress."

The phrase made Jack wince. But he began to lower himself onto the bed. Slowly the sheets slid away from the doll's head. She was staring at him and next to her blonde hair was a pair of exquisite diamond earrings spilling out of a small, beaded purse. They looked vaguely familiar. Where had he seen them before?

"Feel inside," the voice teased. He saw no movement of it's mouth. Was she talking telepathically?

Jack touched the purse and opened the top a bit wider. This curiosity was killing him. Would kill him? What was he doing? He noticed a flash of metal. The earrings weren't the only things hidden inside the purse. A slim, pearl handled pistol slipped out of it's hiding place.

"A gun!?" he asked. "Why do you have a gun?"

The room began to spin. Jack held onto the bed frame feeling he might vomit. Then he heard the female voice again. Only, this time it seemed far away, as if it was filtering out from the distant past.

"That wasn't part of the deal, Jack!" she screamed in anger. "You ain't taking Baby. I don't care what she's worth in ransom! I'll kill you before I let you put your filthy paws on her!"

Jack heard the echo of two gunshots and suddenly glimpsed the blonde from the bar. Her hair was covered in blood, the pearl handled pistol still smoking in her hand. He shook his head and screamed, "Wake up, wake up! Jesus, Jack, wake up!"

"You ain't asleep, pal," the doll said. A red stain was beginning to form on Violet's white bisque forehead. "Norma couldn't keep it clammed. Too much hooch, too much opium and too much money tempting fate. Poor sister was always behind the eight ball. She couldn't live with what she done and she done him in but good. But, Violet hid her secrets in the end. Get the picture, Daddy?" Now, the bright red splotch began to spread onto the beautiful sequined dress. "Give up the ice, Vi. She's got it comin'. That's deal. Maybelle gets the stash and keeps Norma's secrets."

"Who's Norma? Who's Maybelle?" Jack shouted.

"Audrey's next in line. She's the favorite. Lillith was never gonna do it. The dame don't know the meaning of family. It was promised to Maybelle and now that she's gone, it's all up to Audrey. She takes care of Violet and keeps the secrets safe."

For an instant Jack saw a flash of the blonde from the bar again. Could this be Norma? Maybe nobody else was meant to see her except Jack. He can't remember any of the other guys mentioning the blonde.. And she was hard to ignore. Norma must have been some distance relative of Audrey's. And the name, Maybelle, May, Audrey's grandmother, she was supposed to get the loot. Was that it? And Norma died leaving all her secrets behind, inside of Violet. Or was Norma's spirit still alive, possessing the doll in some hellish attempt to keep family secrets and control the will of the next woman who inherits the loot?

Jack forced himself to look at Violet. Her vivid blue shadowed eyes were open and staring into space. Her angelic face surrounded by a halo of waves, now turned ghastly red. Her cupie doll lips slightly parted with a thin trail of blood seeping out the side.

"Dear God!" Jack uttered. "I've got to stop this!"

The doll was now winking at him. "You ain't gonna stop nothin' pal. She's gonna take good care of me. That's part of the deal."

"What the hell do you mean? What deal? Audrey isn't going to take care of Violet or Norma or whoever the hell you are. You can keep the ice and anything else to do with this insanity." Jack felt the room turn colder.

"Men, ya ain't good for nothin' but showing a girl a good time and breakin' her heart until she blows her brains out! Audrey gets the doll, or you'll find yerself on a long drive down a short road. I can make her do more than talk the talk. I can make her do whatever needs to be done. Men are a dime a dozen. Norma figured that out too late. You got nothin' to say about it. Or, do I have to draw you a picture?"

The air in the bedroom turned to freezing. Jack stared at the doll as a hazy glow emanated from it's small body and began to grow in size. It contorted, twisting and turning until it formed into the full, curvy figure of a young woman. The sheets shifted and there, lying in the same low cut, silk dress, wavy blonde tresses and vintage diamond earrings, was the blonde bombshell from the bar. She winked at him and said, "I'm Norma, nice ta meetcha." She glanced at the pistol and smiled. "Wanna play, Big Boy?"

Terrified, Jack ran out of the room, grabbing his pants and car keys. He dared not look back, fearing Norma/ Violet might be hot on his heels.

Norma lay on her side, one eye covered by soft, peek-a-boo waves. She held the pistol in well-manicured fingers. "Don't stay out too late, Daddy. I'll stick around 'til the sandman comes."

The Keeper

Edward Ahern

Hector Provenzano sat sweating under the air conditioner. His words slid across the room like melting butter.

"Nice little office, Jason. I'm surprised. Figured you'd just retire and guard the family money rather than waste time on pro bono work."

Jason Olsen forced a smile. Hector was city hall's fixer and bag man, and he needed to play nice with him. "Judge Mitchell traps me sometimes before I can get out of court."

Provenzano had squished into the easy chair like play dough. As he leaned toward Jason billows of fat rolled over his belly and chest. "You're known as a loner, Jason, not one of the crew. Maybe that's why Willie Mitchell picks on you. Maybe there's something that'll help you get along. Willie appointed you to represent that derelict Carlsen?"

"Yeah. I think he relished forcing one Scandinavian to defend another."

"The bastard has been giving us trouble for years. Complaints from neighbors about that vicious dog of his, citations for property violations, tax delinquency. We're finally evicting him for non-payment of taxes, and good riddance.

"We need to move ahead on this, Jason. There's a future use for the site Just give him his due process and we'll move him out. Judge Mitchell will almost undoubtedly deny any continuance. "

Provenzano waited, his gelled hair unruffled by for the air conditioner fan. Jason understood. A lip-service defense meant a favor owed to him. And obstruction on Jason's part earned him an indelible black spot.

"So Mitchell is on board with this? I haven't even met Carlsen, Hector. He'll get as good a defense as I provide other assigned clients. But I understand that the wheels of justice need to keep grinding."

Provenzano nodded. "Good, good. I think we understand each other. Let's have lunch once the proceeding is over." He heaved himself out of the chair and left.

Jason tapped a pencil on the legal pad in front of him. The rat warren at city hall must be stirred up for the city attorney to show up in person

rather than just telephone. He could ask for something significant. Jason plugged his new client's telephone number into his cell phone and called.

"Mr. Carlsen? It's Jason Olsen, your court-appointed attorney."

"Oh, yeah? Are you any good?"

"Mr. Carlsen, we need to discuss your upcoming eviction hearing. Could you be in my office this Friday at 2 p.m.?"

"Look, shyster, I'm legally blind and diabetic. I can't leave this house. You come see me. Same time, my place."

Jason's GPS didn't recognize the address, but he eventually found the house. It crouched on the front edge of two acres of land, perhaps a tenth of a mile down the road from an expressway exit. *Wal-Mart?* Jason wondered. *Home Depot?* Somebody wanted the land stripped of its inhabitants.

The building's exposed beams and timbers had aged to the color of rotted leaves. Not faux Tudor chocolate, more black than brown. A thickly barred cage for a dog run was attached directly to one side of the building, with a wooden flap through which a large dog could get in and out. The windows were small and barred, the storm door pulled out and replaced with a barred gate. Jason wondered if the prison was meant to keep people out or the dog in. No doorbell, just a large bronze knocker. At the first knock a muted snarling began from behind the thick wooden door.

Viggo Carlsen opened the door while clutching a large dog's choke collar. Carlsen was fat bellied and skinny limbed, making Jason think of a tick. Carlsen shuffled into his living room, dog at his side. The animal was firm muscled and sinewy, but at least 120 pounds, a bastard mix that looked like a wolf.

It growled softly as Carlsen spoke. "Skinny little shit, aren't you. I expect you to get me off."

"Nice dog. What's its name?"

"Garmr. Olsen, eh? Swedish family?"

Norwegian."

"Even better." Carlsen scratched the dog's ears and it stilled. He didn't offer Jason anything to drink or eat.

As he usually did with clients, Jason hid behind his open briefcase and legal papers. "Mr. Carlsen, let me be frank with you. I've gone over your file. You haven't paid taxes in over ten years. Your neighbors have provided affidavits on various transgressions-- dog howling, assault by the same animal, slander-- they don't seem to like you. The house is in

violation of several building codes which you've declined to fix. You've been served with various papers which you never acted on…"

"I never got them."

"According to the process servers you did. Your dog tore into one of them. Your last court appointed attorney filed for a postponement and then withdrew from your case. He hasn't taken my phone calls, so I don't know why. In view of your infirmities I can probably get you an extra month to move out, but I'm afraid there doesn't seem to be much else I can do for you."

Garmr stared intently at Jason, then sniffed deeply, committing Jason's appearance and scent to memory. Jason tried to stare back. The animal had strong lines and a regal head. Its mottled gray and black fur shaded into the dark carpeting. *Vicious though*, Jason reminded himself. It opened and flexed its jaws, as if it could taste him.

Carlsen broke into his thoughts. "Listen carefully. I'm very old. And infirm. I live quietly in this house and watch over Garmr, as others have before me. Everything will stay calm as long as we're here. You don't want to cut us loose."

The old man addressed Jason like a trainee in a supermarket. Jason got the feeling that a long time ago, Carlsen had been important and deferred to. "I'm afraid you're the one who'll have to listen, Mr. Carlsen. There is no legal way to prevent your eviction. I can only try and make the process less painful for you."

Jason sat facing the front door. He noticed that the inside of the door had been splintered and scratched raw.

Carlsen looked more closely at him. "Are you one of the Olsens from Indian River? Pretty well off then. I already talked with that blimp attorney from city hall. This is our house, our place. It's special. If we're severed from it, you'll be among the first to regret it. Think of it as biting the hand that frees you."

"I don't think you're in a position for sarcasm or threats, Mr. Carlsen."

"No threats. Just assurances. Some things are best left undisturbed until its their time. We've been in this house longer than you've been alive. It's the kennel we're permanently boarded at, two rabid dogs in quarantine. There'll be hell to pay if we got loose."

“Mr. Carlsen, arrangements can be made to house you in an elder care facility, but you’ll need to give up the dog. The animal shelter will try and place it with someone else, although that, given its age and disposition, will be difficult.”

The old man’s lips split apart, but his uneven teeth remained clenched. The dog resumed growling, hackles stiffened. Jason broke off eye contact with both of them.

Carlsen’s teeth parted. “I’ve run out of the money set aside to maintain us here, and those that provided it are long gone. Just get us an extension, sonny boy, a compassionate stay of execution, whatever. It’s worth your life.”

“Our court date is in three weeks. You have to prepare yourself to attend the hearing, and then in all probability pack up and leave.”

“You’re got it all plotted out, haven’t you, you and that oily city attorney and whore judge. But there’s a price to pay, a consequence. Especially for you. We won’t go softly into the night.”

Garmr gave Jason a reflective stare as he left. Three weeks later, Jason, Provenzano and judge Willie Mitchell sat in an otherwise empty courtroom. Provenzano and Mitchell talked insider gossip that Jason was enviously excluded from. Carlsen was an hour late for his own hearing.

“Willie?”

“Hector?”

“I don’t think we need to dawdle here. Let’s proceed?”

“Jason?”

He hesitated. His law school training tugged at him to make excuses and delay. Provenzano stared intently at him.

“I did warn him, your honor. Given his intransigence I won’t petition for any further delays.“

“Very well, we’ll proceed. I’ll arrange to have the eviction papers served.”

The three men looked at each other in silence, unwilling to pay lip service to what they’d just done. Jason knew that Willie Mitchell was a man who couldn’t be bought, only rented, and would conveniently forget any commitments he’d made. He smiled to himself. *Maybe I need to sic Garmr on him.*

Jason skipped going back to his office and drove over to his almost empty apartment. The half gallon of scotch sat on an empty kitchen counter.

Jason poured a generous portion into a plastic water glass. The prenuptial agreement had spared the family money, but after the divorce Cindy had vacuumed up most of their belongings.

Provenzano called two days later.

"Jason, did you hear anything from Carlsen?"

"No, and I expected him to make more threats."

"He won't. He's dead."

"When? How?"

"The process server went to his house this morning. Carlsen asked him to wait in the open doorway for a minute, then called him in. Carlsen had slit his wrists, and that damned dog was licking up the blood as it pumped out. The dog tore up the process server's leg pretty bad before it took off."

"So the dog's loose? You think it's rabid?"

"How the hell should I know? Makes our life simpler though, doesn't it?"

Jason hung up, poured himself some scotch and thought things through. It was less messy now. Carlsen couldn't complain about a shoddy legal defense. Jason was still owed the favor. He toasted the dog control officer who would have to trap the beast.

Two weeks went by with only routine aggravation. Cindy called once to blame Jason for a late alimony check and remind him what an inadequate husband he'd been. Carlsen was brusquely consigned to an unmarked pauper's grave. Jason speculated about starting a relationship, then realized he wasn't acquainted with any attractive women. One evening, scotch in hand and Channel 8 in view, Jason learned that Willie Mitchell had been murdered. He called Provenzano

"Hector, what the hell happened to Judge Mitchell?"

"Just read the report. He got it in the parking garage under the courthouse, next to his car. His throat was ripped out, and his mouth savaged and tongue torn out. It's missing."

"Some guy with a knife? He screwed over lots of people."

"No, no. Not cut off, torn out. Like by an animal."

"Jesus." Jason paused. "Did they ever find Carlsen's dog?"

"Not that I know of. But what the hell, it lived six miles from the courthouse."

“You didn’t see it, Hector. But you’re right, how could a dog have known where to find Mitchell. All the same, I’ll be happier when they trap and kill it.”

“That’s over and done, Jason. Put it in the ground with Carlsen. And Willie.”

“Yeah. Stay safe, Hector.” Jason grimaced to himself. Provenzano was a blooming yeast infection, but Mitchell’s death made Jason want a buddy.

The next morning Jason rode the elevator down from the top floor and cornered the doorman. “George, have you seen any stray dogs around the building? Big black and gray shepherd, yellow eyes?”

“Nah, Mr. Fielding, No strays. And the neighbors walk mostly little yappy things.”

“Okay George, but, look, do me a favor. If you see a dog like that, let me know right away?”

“Sure, Mr. Fielding.”

Jason’s client list was small and undemanding, so he had the morning free. He took his laptop over to city hall and began alternating searches of paper records and on-line leads. Carlsen had lived alone in that house for over fifty years. As far back as Jason could trace there’d been complaints about a dog at that address. On an impulse Jason skimmed the newspaper’s on-line morgue for two years before Carlsen moved in. There’d been animal attacks. Lots of them. Four people had died and three more had been maimed. The headlines had screamed “HELL HOUND” for months. Police theorized that the animal had multiple lairs around the city, but had been unable to find them. And then the attacks stopped. Until now.

On impulse, Jason looked up the name Garmr. A Norse devil dog, the guardian of hell. Supposedly when it began to bark the end of days had arrived. Jason couldn’t recall that the dog had ever barked during his visit,

He needed to talk to someone, but Jason had no friends close enough for him to admit that he was afraid of a stray dog. He called the one person who knew him well.

“Cindy?”

“Jason, whatever it is, you’re not getting it back.”

“No, no, Cindy. Don’t be like that. I just wanted to warn you about something.”

“You’re threatening me now? I’ve still got my lawyer.”

Jason reswallowed his bile. “No, Cindy. There’s a vicious dog loose in town, maybe rabid. It looks and acts like a wolf. It’s killed at least one person and chewed up another.”

“What’s that to me? You gonna try and sic it on me?”

“Jesus-“ Jason almost said honey, but bit the word off before it left his mouth- “Cindy, watch out for it. You see a dog like that, call 911 or me.”

“I’m hoping not to call you ever again, Jason. Goodbye.”

Jason mouthed the word bitch into the dead telephone, already hating himself for calling.

His apartment looked emptier than ever. Jason took stock of his safety. Seventh floor of a building with a doorman. Doors locked on the emergency stairwell going up, unlocked on the way down in case of fire. Remote control on the garage door, but easy enough for an animal to dart in while a car exited. Jason owned no weapons other than kitchen knives, and Cindy had taken most of those. He took a drink out onto the balcony and thought some more. He needed to get a gun.

The next morning Jason located a nearby gun shop. He asked George to call him a taxi.

“Not driving, Mr. Fielding?”

“Not today, George.”

The taxi driver refused to take Jason on a trip of six blocks until Jason promised him a twenty dollar bill on top of the fare. The man at the gun shop was equally reluctant.

“What do you need a hand gun for?”

“Self protection, of course. I sometimes carry large amounts of cash.”

“So you’re gonna need a carry permit as well?”

“I think so.”

“Here’s the deal. I can’t give you a gun until the state cops run a check on you, usually a week or two. You won’t get a carry permit for a month or two while the city cops look up how many times you beat your wife. You look like you want a gun right now. You still want to buy one if you have to wait that long?”

Jason hesitated. A two month delay without protection was intolerable. He noticed a knife display case and stepped over to it.

“How much is that folding knife with the bone handle?”

“The Buck hunter? Four-inch blade, just under the legal limit. $85 out the door.”

“I’ll take it.”

Once outside the store Jason threw away the box and leather sheath and dropped the knife into his right pants pocket. It bounced reassuringly against his thigh as he walked back to the apartment.

Two days later a vagrant was found in an alleyway, torn apart and partially consumed. The creature apparently preferred organ meats. Of course, Jason thought, it’s got to eat and Carlsen isn’t around to feed it. The vagrant was found two miles closer to Jason than the courthouse was. The news reports cited a vicious animal attack. Jason figured one or two more deaths would be enough for “Hell Hound” to get resurrected in the news accounts.

Provenzano never called to schedule lunch and talk about the favor owed. Used and dumped, Jason thought, like always. He knew he needed leverage. Carlsen’s house was up for a tax auction , and Jason put in an obscenely high bid. Now the bastards would have to deal with him.

The phone call from Provenzano came with a threat rather than a promise. “What the hell are you doing, Jason? You think you can diddle us?”

“Hello Hector. I gather somebody’s been snooping in the sealed bids? I’m going to own that cottage, Hector, and when I do we can talk about resale.”

“You faccia di merda. We’re going to stake you out and feed you to that dog you’re so afraid of. You got two days to withdraw your bid.”

“Or what?

Provenzano wheezed. “Think, Fielding. How many cases you gonna get once the word is out that all decisions are going against you? Or you start getting sued for malpractice?”

“Screw you, Hector. I’ll live off the proceeds of the sale of the land.”

Jason hung up but kept thinking. Provanzano’s mention of Garmr was understandable. There’d been a string of disemboweled pets found around the city, and another bum torn apart. The term ‘Hell Hound’ had been resurrected. Garmr was alive and well. Pity, Jason thought, that I can’t direct him to Provenzano.

Several business clients called over the next week to cancel his representation of them. The excuses varied, but one client finally admitted that Provenzano had been spewing acid on Jason’s reputation. Jason fumed

over his second scotch of the evening, but could think of no options other than playing out the hand.

The police called while Jason sat in his office staring at an empty in basket. “Mr. Olsen, we need to ask you where you were last night around 9 p.m.”

“Home alone, like I usually am. The doorman saw me come in. What’s this about?”

“Hector Provenzano was killed last night. Looks like an animal attack, but we’re not ruling out murder. We hear you and him weren’t friends. We need you to come in and talk to us.”

“Tomorrow soon enough?”

“Yeah.”

Jason went back to his apartment and poured a pre-lunch drink. Mitchell and Provenzano, both probably killed by that damned dog. Three times is the charm, he thought, and fingered the knife in his pocket. It felt puny.

Jason ordered food in that night, and took a taxi to the police station the next morning. The interrogation was like chewing without dentures, gummy questions about what reasons he might have for killing Provenzano and ripping out his tongue.

The next day Jason had his office files and desk moved into his apartment. He culled his meager list of clients, eliminating those that required a lot of face time in the city. He hired an ex cop to keep him company when he did go out. The liquor store, thank God, delivered.

One night about a month later he called down to George to check on a late delivery of Chinese food. George didn’t answer. Someone always answered.

He wanted to call 911, but instead went down the elevator to the lobby. George was there, head almost bitten off at the shoulder. The tile floor was strewed with blood and viscera. Jason ran back to the elevator and jumped in. Once in his apartment he relocked the front door, then dialed the police and shrieked to them about George’s death.

Jason poured a drink to smooth over his trembling, then sat in his easy chair, looking out through the balcony doors. He heard a sudden clattering on the roof above him and then a heavy body dropped onto his balcony, smashing his glass-topped table.

Garmr picked himself up, limping, and stared at Jason through the glass, freezing him in his chair. Then it backed up and smashed its head into the door. The glass cracked but held together. It backed up and lunged again, this time shattering the door.

It stood heaving in front of Jason, head split open and bleeding, one eye swollen and distended almost out of its socket. And then it sat back on its rear legs and waited.

Jason fingered the knife in his pocket but knew it was hopeless. The dog would rip into him before he could open the blade. He was immobilized prey.

They sat looking at each other from three feet apart. In the dim light Jason could swear he saw the bleeding stop and the swelling in the eye lessen. *It's healing itself. No animal can do this.*

Jason shrank into fatalistic numbness. *I'm being offered a choice.*

"You need to go back home until it's time?"

The Sphinx-like, swollen headed dog crouched motionless.

"I'll own your home soon. Is that where you belong? But it's life imprisonment for me, isn't it? And it's worth my life to keep you there."

Garmr struggled up and stared at Jason. His bleeding eyes held knowledge.

Jason sat without moving, his thoughts surging through dread and into resignation. *What the hell I can still drink.*

"All right," he whispered. "All right."

Garmr limped over to him and licked Jason's hand, leaving a film of its blood. Jason got up to pour himself another scotch, then thought of Cindy. He turned back toward the dog.

"Before we move in together I want you to make one more house call."

Fear Of Them

Mason Swithen

Beyond the outer rim of the Milky Way,
Within the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy,
Resting about 25,000 light years from our sun,
There is a rare G type star….

Kanara walked through the front doors of Izik High for her last first day of school. After ten years of going through what she had come to see as a flawed education system she was beginning her senior year. She felt lukewarm about the start of the day and wasn't looking forward to her final two semesters.

She moved through the crowded main lobby and maneuvered through underclassmen she didn't recognize. There were a few students her age, but she didn't want to associate with them. School was the place she had seen her friends for years, but it and they had become more and more boring. It was like the chores her parents had her do simply because they did not want to do them.

She felt she had learned a lot during her time in school, but the most important part of education had happened when she was younger. School wasn't fun anymore. Some teachers were past their educational prime and didn't need to be in the classroom. In the difficult world of leaving childhood behind, it was scary to learn she was more interested in some of her classes than the teachers were. Kanara walked through the cramped halls and felt lonely.

***

The school day was shockingly boring during the first two periods. Math class, taught by old Mrs. Hana, was a complete disaster. It was so bad Kanara wondered if the townspeople were paying her to put everyone to sleep. Civics class wasn't much better. Its tediousness was highlighted by Mr. Yenarb's misplaced belief that one person could change the world. Kanara and many of the other seniors thought it was a noble but much too serious message to send a bunch of seventeen year olds on the first day of class.

***

The shock of the day of school came when she entered the music room. She'd almost forgotten that Mr. Ozsy retired at the end of last year. Kanara entered the band room almost expecting him to be standing in front of the practice concert hall. Instead, a dozen students were awkwardly standing by their seats, nervously looking up at the front of the room. Mr. Ozsy wasn't there. It took a moment of starring for her to realize she was looking at a *gorra*. It was the first one she had seen. It was hairy, much more shaggy than any *nahum*. She was almost scared. From the look on the faces of other students, they *were* scared.

Based on the things her father said about them, she half expected the ape looking man-thing to be brandishing a sword and eating a *nahum* toddler. Kanara had heard stories of how brutal the *gorra* were. Everyone said they acted like barbarians. Some people from town said they were lucky to live through experiences with the savages. They were supposed to be the rappers of women and the destroyers of civilizations.

The *gorra's* eyes went from student to student. Their eyes studied back.

Kanara realized *he* was the new music teacher. After getting over the initial shock, she saw that he was dressed like a professional. He had a gray flute in his hands.

Kanara and the other seniors were shocked when a voice like any of their own came from its mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats."

***

"I can't believe it!" Sargo said after class. His cheeks were flushed, and he had a frown on his face. "Who's idea was it to hire one of them? It's sick."

Several other seniors were attracted to the comment, and seemed not to care the doors to the music room were still open. Kanara joined the group.

"I'm with you, man," Dirga said. "Those *gorra* are just slime. He's filthy, and he does not belong here."

A chorus of approval came from the other students in the hall. Kanara remained silent, wanting to hear their thoughts and concerns. They

sounded like the words that came from her fifty-year old father.

"That thing doesn't belong here," Flera spat, looking back through the doorway. Students for the next class made their way into the music room. The upper classman woman looked at some of the younger pupils moving toward the door. "You don't want to go in there." she said.

The senior explained what was waiting for them inside. The new students reacted with revulsion and fear. The sneers on their faces made Kanara think rotten food was nearby.

"Class wasn't that bad," Kanara said.

None of the other students responded. The tone for the next period rang and late arrivals scampered past them. She didn't say anything more and left her shocked classmates standing outside the music room.

***

Kanara went to her art class. While the teacher introduced herself, and the other students floated between paying attention and hoping the day would end, she thought about her music class and what had happened afterwards.

She wasn't surprised by the reaction. It was rare for a *gorra* to be in the area, let alone seek employment in town. People just weren't used to them being around. Racism among the three races was something she had been raised with. She had seen it from her father all of her life.

What was different today was that Kanara spoke up against the bigotry, and she didn't know why. She knew her own thoughts and she knew the comments she'd been raised with. That they were all poor and lazy.

Why had she defended Mr. Habza? She had only sat through one music class. He was a *gorra.*

Kanara looked up at her art teacher and realized she was as bored as the other students. It was the first day of school and she was already tired of a class that she needed for graduation credit.

Mr. Habza had made things interesting. Kanara thought back to his lesson and recalled his style. His introduction had been short. He informed them their purpose was to play music, and his job was to help them play better. Then they'd played. It had only been easy tunes everyone mastered years before, but they had played. She'd been immersed in her flute, and

tried not to make mistakes. The fact her teacher was a different species hadn't mattered.

Kanara sat lost in her thoughts. She mentally reviewed how she had become so distracted by the music. With a surge of excitement, the kind someone feels when they receive a long sought gift, she realized she had misplaced what she'd had since childhood. Kanara wasn't sure how it had happened, but for a brief moment, she'd lost her bigotry.

***

When she left school after her final class, Kanara noticed several parents and students at the front desk. The parents looked like they had just come from work, and had anger and concern on their faces. The principal was at the front of the group, trying to gain control.

She stepped closer to the exit and tried to give them a wide berth. She saw eyebrows that were cramped, lips locked in frowns, and nostrils that flared.

She saw Dirga, one of the students from music class, exiting the school and grabbed him. "What's going on?" Kanara asked.

Dirga looked at her like she was the carrier of some awful disease. She saw the awful smile that pushed its way onto his mouth, and realized the adults were looking in the direction of the music room.

"They are here for that *gorra* bastard." he said.

***

Kanara decided to visit her father's father that afternoon. Varpo Reese lived alone in a house in the woods. He was one of the oldest members of the community and at ninety-three, he still impressed people with his ability to provide for himself. Kanara didn't visit him as often as he would have liked, but she'd dropped in three times during the summer. She hadn't planned on stopping by but thought he could provide insight about the day.

Kanara knew from long experience her grandfather was different from her father. Her dad was like a hundred other parents. She didn't know how to deal with him and sometimes wished she could send him back, as though he had come from the pages of a cheap mail order catalogue.

It happened a few months ago, perhaps years later than it should have, but Kanara had realized her father was not a very nice man. Maybe it was because he had complained about his job one too many times, or grumbled he never made enough money once too often. Perhaps it followed a litany of racist comments since childhood. She loved *his* dad, but her father's worldview disturbed her. It made living with him painful.

She ascended the steps to her grandfather's house and wondered why she was thinking so much about her dad. He had not been one of the parents complaining about Mr. Habza. He could have been though, and she knew it. He didn't where his bigotry in public, but didn't mind showing it off at home. Kanara lived with it everyday, and on more than one occasion hoped his deep racism was an inherited trait that skipped a generation. She shuddered and couldn't help wondering how much his beliefs had polluted her own.

Grandpa Reese greeted her with a hug. He'd been rocking away on his porch and bounced up when she'd come into view. The feeling she got with the embrace was similar to a child's need for the same old and stinky blanket with them at bedtime. Security, comfort, and warmth were very desirable feelings to troubled souls and kids.

Grandpa Reese motioned for her to come in. Unopened mail and never read magazines were stacked on the chairs and tables. Cat hair and dust covered the carpets. His cat, Rosa, was not around at the moment. The older he got the less he cleaned.

"It's good to see you," he said through aged and cracked lips. He pointed to a rocking chair that was absent of clutter. He took short steps, making sure to balance himself with each one. Kanara thought of someone walking on ice, taking care to prevent a painful descent. He offered a hot cop of tea. After a few minutes of small talk she described the reopening of school. She explained the other student's reaction when they had to sit through a class with a *gorra,* and she voiced her own troubled thoughts.

"I just didn't react the way they did, Grandpa," Kanara said.

"They sound like your father. I don't suppose he was one of the ignorant parents?" he asked. She told him he had not been, but had thought along similar lines.

Grandpa Reese asked her about the Mr. Habza.

"Well, he looks different than we all do," she said stating the obvious. "I just don't know. I didn't get any sense of him thinking any differently

than we do. He just, well… he just had us play music, Grandpa," she said.

He leaned back in his chair and allowed his back to fall into the cushions. He was silent for a moment. She wondered if the talking was physically tiring for him. He licked his lips and blinked several times. Kanara wondered if his mind was in a place far away.

"Hey," she said, wondering if she were waking him up. "Would you mind telling me about your experiences with the other races? I know Dad doesn't like you to talk about it, but well…I'd like to know."

"You don't want to hear me ramble about memories floating in the distant past, honey," he said. "You have a good head on your shoulders. Your view of the world is fine. You don't need me to tell you about history."

Kanara didn't bother telling him that his comment was exactly the point. She wanted to discuss the attitudes and interactions of earlier generations. She didn't want to press his fragile mind, but she needed to hear from him.

"Please, Grandpa." Kanara said.

They talked. It was not the first time she heard some of the stories he told. His age allowed him to forget the shortest distance between points A and B was a straight line. He could go off in different directions. But like a book that reads better the second time, she found herself wanting details.

For the next several hours, Kanara balanced her ancient grandfather's need for rest with her own compulsion to hear his views. He spoke of his own youth; when racial tensions between the five races were something that dominated society.

He told her of the Great Wars, and how the raw taste of racism had fueled a hunger and fear that eliminated the *xreti* and the *wavrons*.. He was lost in his memories when he told her of the graceful and catlike *xreti* and the bio-weapon that had killed them. When he mentioned the methodical purging decades ago, tears came to his eyes. He told of the last remnants of insect-like *wavron* population hunted down by secret police thugs. He spoke of his childhood and going to the other continents to see how they lived, before the wars. Grandpa Reese told her of his regrets and fears. He told her sometimes he had needed to ignore the horrible events that unfolded around him.

When it was well past supper she knew she had to leave. She thanked him the way she always did, with a hug that might be the last one

she ever gave him.

"Kanara?" he said hunched and tired.

"Yes, Grandpa?" she said not wanting to leave.

"Make sure you keep your history grade up. It was my favorite subject, you know," he said.

Kanara didn't tell her grandfather she didn't have a history class this semester. She hugged him again, told him she loved him, and began her walk home.

The first sun had already set. The second one was her companion as she considered what she'd just heard and a future she was unsure of.

***

When Kanara got home her father was reading the evening newspaper. He gave her a weak "hello" and non committal "how are you". After less than two minutes of bland and uncaring conversation she left him in the living room. To her surprise, he did not bring up Mr. Habza.

She could not stop thinking about the stories Grandpa Reese shared with her. She grabbed leftovers from the fridge, thanked fate she didn't have to eat supper with her dad, and went to her room. On the way she stopped at the bookshelf in the wall and took an encyclopedia from the out of date set. It was a volume from late in the alphabet. Within its pages she was hoping to find all that remained of the *Xreti* and *Wavrons*

***

Just before bed, her father opened her door without knocking. With little guilt, Kanara acknowledged she had been hoping to go to bed without talking to him.

"What kind of school would higher a *gorra*?" he asked. The evening newspaper was folded under one of his arms. Kanara shut the encyclopedia.

"I don't know, Dad," she replied. She feared giving him any information would prolong his presence at her door.

"Well did you see it?" he asked.

It took her a moment to figure out that "it" was her father's way of identifying her new music teacher. She mulled lying to him. He would

want to know why she never mentioned it in the first place, if he found out after the fact. And he would find out.

"Yes, he is my music teacher, Mr. Habza," she said.

"WHAT!!!!???" he screamed. "That *thing* is one of *your* teachers?"

Kanara looked at her father and wondered how often he had said similar things. "You are not going to school tomorrow," he said, as though there was an illness he wanted to keep his daughter isolated from.

Their eyes locked. Her father's stare was cold and uncaring. She wondered how he saw himself, and it occurred to her that he had no idea how his daughter felt about him. In that moment Kanara felt small and vulnerable.

"Dad, he actually is a good teacher," she said.

His mouth dropped open, his eyebrows pressed down and his forehead creased.

"What?" he said.

The realization she didn't want any association with this man swelled within her. She thought about the rest of the evening and saw a brutal argument coming. She thought back to the fights her parents had when she was younger, and wondered what would happen if she stood up to him.

"You are not going anywhere near that filth." he said.

Kanara got off her bed and with one stroke of her forearm she dumped everything from the top of her bureau into her duffel bag. Make up, tooth brush, comb, and all the other morning essentials clattered together as her father stood dumbfounded in the doorway. She grabbed a change of cloths for school, and made sure she had the encyclopedia.

"I do love you, dad," she said weakly, and she wasn't sure if she meant it. Kanara moved to leave the room. For one brief instant, she questioned if this was how her mother had felt when she left him. She wondered if he would grab her arm, but he didn't. She tossed her father's blazing eyes aside and felt her body start to shake with nervousness.

She walked down the front steps and decided her grandfather's home seemed like a much better place to be.

***

The school was on a block schedule system with alternating days of classes so Kanara did not have the chance to attend music on the second day of

school. She would have Mr. Habza again on the third day of classes.

The fact the school had a *gorra* teaching was getting plenty of attention.

When she arrived on school property Kanara saw three sets of parents and a few students standing on the side of the road. They held signs and waved them at the cars. They pushed them into the faces of people entering the building. She was shocked by the hatred on display. One sign held a picture of a *gorra* and had a massive red "X" taped it. Another had a saying that read, "Why'd we higher IT?" and a third embarrassingly read, "They can't be educated, why do we have one educating?"

It was worse on the way into the building. There was a mob just outside the front doors and their intent was painfully clear. One or two held offensive signs and many looked furious.

Kanara wondered if Mr. Habza had even got come to work.

***

During the day she found herself in countless situations where she thought she was talking to her father rather than classmates. At the end of school she stopped by Mr. Yenrab's classroom. The civics teacher was sitting behind his desk, smiling pleasantly.

"Do you have a second?" she asked politely as she leaned through the door.

"Yes, yes…come on in." he said, remaining behind his desk.

"Mr. Yenrab," she said, "I was wondering if you would be willing to talk about the current situation with Mr. Habza." He grimaced, as though the topic had already been on his plate several times. He looked like he was getting tired of eating the same thing over an over again.

"You came to see me. What are your feelings?" Yenrab asked.

Kanara was silent and tried to judge what her civics teacher thought. Earlier in the day she found herself thinking of the different things Yenrab had discussed during the first class. He'd explained the semester was as much about current events as government.

"I think it's sick. I'm really ashamed at how so many of our community members are treating him, like he is some kind of animal. They act as though a *gorra* has no right to interact with *nahums,*" she said.

Yenrab swallowed. Kanara wondered if he regretted allowing her to come into his room. She waited for his response, to say something about how he felt. She hoped she was misreading him, but she got the impression she had approached a man more interested in his paycheck than doing the right thing.

His mouth opened and he started to speak, but then he stopped himself. His eyes wandered, and his cheeks turned red. Kanara looked at her teacher and saw he was afraid.

"I'm sorry, Kanara" he stammered. "I'm really busy….could we continue this conversation another time?"

She stood just inside the classroom for a moment. She watched the teacher in charge of teaching students about civic duty sit and do nothing.

"I'm sorry, too." she said and left his classroom.

***

Kanara spent another night at her grandpa's but he was too tired to talk. She spent much of the evening looking at pictures from his photo albums. She was struck by how different things were all of those decades ago, when youth had been a friend of Grandpa Reese's. She was enchanted by the places he traveled and the other races he'd met. There were several photos of his visits to the old *wavron* islands. He had stood among the extinct. How he had tolerated their exoskeletons, antenna, and pincers was beyond her, just looking at them gave her the willies. There were a few pictures of his visits to the *xreti*. In one that she thought captured the meaning of his life, he was playing with three *xreti* kittens, each about half his size. How anyone had ever managed to kill them off was beyond her.

Kanara went to bed thinking how best to right the wrong she was aware of. She would not shun the other races. She would live her life the way her Grandfather had.

***

The next day Kanara was the first one to school. She arrived before the coming of the dawn, with the three moons low against the glittering starlit horizon. It was slightly cool and a little damp. The summer humidity had

not let go, and it seemed as though the fall's cold temperatures where not far off.

She got there before the janitors and the teachers. She wondered if she'd see Mr. Habza. She sat on the pavement, let her book bag fall to the cement, and waited.

Kanara was nervous. She had never done anything based on her own view of how the world should be. She had never acted against societal ills. To be raised and initiated into a world as a defeated participant in racial intolerance was frightening.

More than once she thought of just letting today be another day. She contemplated going to class, shutting up, and remaining silent. Fear and uncertainty gripped her like a person caught on thin ice, not knowing if her courage would crack, disperse, and drift away. Kanara was more scared than she had ever been.

Then, as the edge of the morning sky brightened, and the three moons each became more pale on the horizon, she felt the light of the new day wash over her.

The first of the cars drove into the parking lot. More cars would arrive soon. Then the buses full of students.

She opened her bag and removed her supplies. Two folded pieces of cardboard, a roll of tape, and three different colored markers. She lay down on the sidewalk, and slowly began writing.

Minutes passed. Kanara felt lonely.

The janitors and cafeteria staff arrived and approached the building. They gave her odd looks. Kanara cursed and wished she had completed her sign before the adults arrived for work, but the message needed to be concise, direct, and to the point. It needed to be effective.

She finished and looked at the parking lot. A few educators were arriving. She was ready to put herself out there, to let the world read her thoughts and feelings.

Kanara heard the grumbling of a bus engine. A few cars pulled in and adults locked doors and lugged teaching bags on shoulders.

She gripped the edge of her sign and wondered what the day would be like. She held it up high and invited everyone to read it.

Ignorant minds and angry eyes sneered as they read four simple words.

"JUST LET HIM TEACH"

Snap

Jeff T. Robinson

Joey liked Ellie the first moment he saw her. Of course, he knew it would never be reciprocated, he just had too many faults. But, goodness sakes, to quote his mother, she got his blood pumping.

It had been a Friday night at Cooler's, drinking beer and shooting pool, when in she walked. Joey spotted her the moment she entered. Laughing as he walked by Keith, he nodded in her direction and commented on how he'd like to pop her cork. Friends since grade school, they had an unspoken agreement that their banter had to meet the code expected of males in their age range. Even at twenty-three, Joey's own cork was yet to be popped, but they both laughed anyway. Sue sat in a chair against the wall, quietly watching, throwing in an occasional comment, but not participating in the game. She had been steady with Keith for close to three years. Now she just sat, giggling.

"What's the secret?" Joey asked as he passed her, looking for the right angle on the cue ball after a particularly awkward leave.

Still giggling, Sue stood. "Like to pop her cork, would you? Maybe you'll get a chance to ask her."

Joey turned, only then noticing that the female subject of his champagne reference was heading straight for their table.

The two women exchanged a hug, then Sue turned to Keith. "Ellie, this is my boyfriend Keith," then toward Joey, "and this is Joey. He has a question for you."

Joey blushed, wanting to turn away, but bravely held his ground. "Hi Ellie, I think she misunderstood a conversation we were having. It's nice to meet you."

"He wondered if he could pop your cork," Sue interjected before any more pleasantries could be exchanged.

"Pop my cork?" Ellie smiled mischievously. "I'm not sure I even know where my cork is located, or is that just your way of offering to buy me a drink?"

"I'll certainly buy you a drink," Joey blurted, realizing Ellie had just dropped the ladder he needed to climb out of the hole he found himself in. "What would you like?"

“Just grab me a glass, Joey. I’ll help you boys finish off your pitcher,” she replied, punctuating the sentence with a flirtatious wink.

Joey felt his adrenaline surge as he turned his back and headed for the bar. For a moment a wave of joyous exhilaration swept through him, then, just as quickly, the wave met the mountain of doubts that inhabited his psyche. Turning from the bar with a clean glass in hand, already he knew she was just toying with him. A night of free beer and pool for her, he thought, then, at most, a meaningless, tongue-less kiss, and he’d never make second base, let alone home plate. Already he didn’t trust her.

Eyes down, Joey walked straight to the pitcher of beer and quickly filled her glass. Before he could finish, he felt something soft press against him. Turning, he realized it was Ellie, her breast against his arm.

“Oops, I’m sorry,” she giggled, quickly grabbing a napkin and wiping the foam running down the side of her glass. “Thank you, Joey,” she said in a near whisper, then left a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Hey, Casanova, your shot.” Keith smiled, needling his friend, certain of the rush of emotions he was experiencing.

Joey turned and retrieved his cue leaning against the wall, then stole a glance in Ellie’s direction.

“Knock ’em dead, killer.” She lifted her glass to Joey, then downed half the contents.

Sizing up the table, his eyes on the felt, his mind on the flesh, he turned to his friend with a look of confusion. “Big ones or little ones?”

“Big ones,” Keith yelled through his laughter, “of course.”

Joey rocketed the cue ball into the far corner, knocking the duck into the pocket. Eying another stripe sitting near a side pocket, but at nearly a right angle, he gently rolled the cue ball forward. The striped ball disappeared. All that remained was the eight ball, but it sat at the opposite end of the table, not at a terribly difficult angle, but with a lot of green between. Knock this one down and she’s sure to be impressed, he thought as he leaned in. Taking a deep breath and letting the shot go, the eight ball clanked into the corner pocket, the cue ball deflecting across the table and missing a side pocket by less than a quarter of an inch. Joey exhaled victoriously and raised his arms in triumph. Sue offered a one hand clapping salute as she lifted her beer to her mouth. Feeling a sudden burst of confidence, Joey looked toward Ellie, hoping to be met by her eyes. Sitting within inches of each other, Keith and Ellie were in a deep conversation,

neither having noticed that the game was over. . . . Keith wasn't a very faithful boyfriend and Joey had viewed similar scenes numerous times. It wasn't Keith's nature to so blatantly do it right in front of Sue, though, but there was no doubt, he was hitting on Ellie, and Sue had to know it. Worst of all, though, and this was where Joey's heart sank and the demons clawed their way back to the top, Ellie was obviously enjoying it, the little tramp.

"Loser racks," Joey stated without emotion, draining the pitcher into his glass, getting mostly foam.

Keith said something quietly to Ellie as he rose from his seat. The two laughed as he started gathering the balls.

"You're quite the hustler, it appears," Ellie teased Joey, patting the seat Keith had just vacated.

Waving a finger to the barmaid a couple of tables away, who nodded her assent, Joey turned back to Ellie. Grabbing his beer and summoning some temporary courage from the small part of his ego that still held he was worthy of love, Joey nearly flopped into the chair next to Ellie, his legs going wobbly as he neared her.

"You can play this game," Joey offered, remembering that the first rule of romance is to just stay polite.

"Oh, I like to play," Ellie responded, the flirtatious smile causing Joey's stomach to tighten. "I just prefer contact sports, unless you'd like to be a tag team."

Joey fought for the right thing to say, but could only hold out his arm to signal that she go first.

Ellie giggled, lightly touching Joey's arm. "You break, though, too many balls. I prefer to concentrate on one ball at a time."

Joey rose from his seat, slightly amazed that he was able to stand. He couldn't remember being so aroused so quickly by a woman, at least not one in the flesh. Her eyes seemed to pull him in, making everything and everyone else little more than a fog in an irrelevant background. Forcing himself to look away and grabbing his cue, he wiped his forehead, the room suddenly unbearably hot. Lining up the shot hurriedly, his adrenaline eliminating any chance of poise, the cue ball barely skimmed his intended target. Ellie laughed as the cue ball bounded off the end rail and landed square in the pocket where Joey still held his cue.

“Oh my, looks like I might have teamed up with the wrong partner.” Ellie laughed, now joined by Keith and Sue. Joey glared at the three, suddenly feeling something nearing hatred for Ellie, only slightly less for the other two. Had Keith put her up to it? Was this some twisted joke? Keith knew Joey’s dating past, what little there was to know, and he knew the pain Joey had endured when the short relationships had ended. And what of Sue? She was usually so much fun to be around, but tonight she’d intentionally tried to embarrass him.

Conveniently interrupted by the barmaid, Joey paid the charge, even throwing in an extra dollar to show Ellie he was classy. Without a word, he shrugged off their offers to get this round, then poured another beer and settled quietly into a seat away from Ellie.

“Uh-oh, I think I hurt his feelings,” Ellie sighed, her bottom lip extended.

“You guys are up.” Joey directed, changing the subject, his heart still racing with a mixture of anger and hope.

Ellie walked toward Joey and sat softly next to him. Even the way she moved was sexy, he thought, his pulse quickening as she neared, feeling like his heart was beating in his ears as she sat down, her sweet smell within inches.

“I’m sorry, I was just teasing,” Ellie said, her voice striking a tone of sincerity. Leaning in, she left a soft kiss on Joey’s cheek, then gently turning his face to hers, another one on his lips.

Nearly frozen in his seat, Joey felt naked and vulnerable. All his faults had to be obvious, she was so near. But still, she’d just kissed him, on the lips! A distant memory stirred, coming into focus: all those Sundays as a young boy when he’d sat quietly, the pastor repeating week after week how God had someone planned for everyone. His doubts had long ago obliterated any semblance of belief in that simple promise, but there sat Ellie, her hand now softly massaging his thigh.

“Your turn, Ellie,” Keith grumbled, flopping in his seat. “Sometimes I really hate this game,” he concluded under his breath, then polished off his beer.

Ellie rose, softly plucking the cue from Joey’s grip. “What do you think, partner?”

Lost in a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts, Joey heard the question, but it hung in his mind for a moment fighting to come into focus. “Take the

four, but not too strong, should leave you with another good shot." The words sounded shaky and bland, like he had a bad cold, but Ellie just smiled and winked.

"Okay." She bent in front of Joey, her butt inches from her face.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, he reached for his beer, nearly toppling it in the process. Looking to Keith, his friend nodded emphatically in Ellie's direction. Words weren't necessary: Keith was without a doubt; Joey should go for it.

Sue's nature was generally quiet, with sudden bursts of spontaneous wit, but usually quiet. Now, she again was just sitting and taking in the developing story before her. Ellie's overly flirtatious style often sent the wrong message and Sue had seen it backfire. It wasn't that she wasn't interested when coming on so strong, it was just sometimes too much for some males. Observing now, she noted how Joey was squirming, but she was certain that he was very attracted to Ellie. There had always been, though, something just not quite right about Joey. Without being able to put a finger on it, his moodiness made her wary. That was of little concern right now, though. Sue had been in on a plan with Ellie's parents to get Ellie out of the house. Within minutes, and without Ellie having any hint, her older brother was making a surprise visit home after four years serving in the military overseas.

Ellie missed the shot on the four ball, plopping back in the seat next to Joey. "Sorry, partner, I'm just not too good at this game."

"That's alright," Joey started, his fear instinctively making him turn away from contact with Ellie's eyes.

Ellie reached out and again turned his face toward her. "You don't need to be afraid of me," she pleaded, "I like you."

Feeling a nearly overwhelming attraction to Ellie, Joey's fears escalated in proportion. Still, the faint promise of Sundays past gathered his courage. "I like you, too," he stuttered, happy to just get the words out.

Ellie smiled and grasped Joey's hand, then with a look of embarrassment, dropped her head. "I just have a habit of coming on way too strong."

A subtle sense of calm came over Joey, temporarily pushing the tumult down. He looked at Ellie in profile, her eyes on the floor. Wow, she was beautiful. Sensing her vulnerability, for once he just reacted without thinking, extending his arm around her shoulder. Looking up, she smiled.

“Hi, Ell.”

Instantly recognizing the voice, Ellie bounded off her chair; her older brother, in uniform, catching her in his arms.

Joey stared wide-eyed, at first unsure of what was happening. Ellie’s arms were wrapped around the man’s shoulders, the two spinning and laughing. Tears were streaming down Ellie’s cheeks, but Joey struggled to make out the rushed exchange of words between the two. There was no point in hearing it, though, Joey knew what was happening. Slowly his face dropped to the floor, his eyes narrowed and the chorus of demons taking up residence in his mind told him that this time he wasn’t going to be the victim.

Keith smiled from his seat, as did Sue, beaming that her small part in the plan had brought such joy to her friend. Around the room, the apparent happiness of the siblings being reunited brought smiles to the faces of a dozen pool players along with a couple of barmaids. Out of the corner of Keith’s eye, he saw the pool cue rotate in Joey’s hand.

“You whore!” Joey’s full-throated scream brought a split second of dead silence to the room, followed immediately by the simultaneous crack of a cue breaking and the dull thud as it encountered Ellie’s head.

Next Year

Nicholas Corbett

"Will you just sit still, you little brat!"

I loved it when my dad had to work late managing his shopping centre, 'cause it meant that I had a baby sitter.

"No! Don't mess with that, you'll break it".

When I had a baby sitter, it meant no rules, I owed the house. I could do whatever I wanted, and I wanted to have *fun* this Christmas Eve.

"What did I just say?"

And the best part of all: seeing how long the new babysitter would last before they would break. It's like an early Christmas present to me.

"That's it. I'm not doing any more", tired and annoyed she sat down on a chair in the living room and folded her arms. "You win; you have free rein of the house".

A smile formed across my face. Ha, I've beaten her earlier than I expected.

"Go on. I won't stop you. You can do whatever you want".

I moved over to my father's book shelf and started pulling down the books, throwing them on the floor.

"I'm just surprised with Christmas being so far away that you would risk Santa knowing what a naughty boy you've been".

"Santa gives me presents whether I'm good or bad". I turned around and bobbed my tongue out at her for fun.

"Yeah, but you've just turned six, right?"

I pulled some more books off the shelf "Yeah, so what?"

"Hasn't anyone told you what happens to you when you turn six?"

My hands drifted from the books, "Told me what?"

"What exactly happens to you when you're a naughty boy before Christmas".

"I told you" I interrupted. "I get presents at Christmas, even when I'm naughty". My hands starts to move over to a rather large book on the shelf, so large I need two hands to pull it off.

"NO" she yells. I think I've gotten on her last nerve. "No, that was before you reached six. Santa has to be nice to you the first few years so that you know the rules. But when you reach six, he changes the game".

My hands left the book and I moved closer to her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, basically, instead of not getting any toys, Santa stops being nice and becomes naughty instead".

"Santa's never naughty".

"That's what the media want you to believe, but in truth he is a monster, who likes to eat little children".

"Santa doesn't eat children".

"He does, he gobbles them up. He eats them whole. Or sometimes chews on children's legs and arms if he isn't already full. He particularly likes little children who run around. There's less fat on them".

"If he's soooo bad, why doesn't the police put him in jail?".

"It's because they can't contain him. They tried in the past. Most of the people who went after him died. And when they did finally capture him, he would escape the next day. So instead they made a deal with him.

"The deal was that Santa would have to stay away for 364 Days of the year. But every year, on the 24th December, he would be allowed to gorge himself on all the bad little children over the age of six, all over the world."

I turned away from the sitter and faced the coffee table in the centre of the room. A toy Santa stood in the centre of the table, waiting to shake its bum and play some music.

He didn't look scary with his cloud like beard, fat wobbly belly and rosy red cheeks. He didn't seem like the same Santa she described.

"He doesn't look like that either." I looked away from the jolly man on the table and back to my baby sitter. "That's just how the media wants you to believe he looks, so that your parents will let him into your home voluntarily. Not that they have a choice".

I was afraid to ask, but I had to know. "How…. How does he look then?'

"He starves himself most of the year, so he is stick thin. His skin clinging to his bones ever so tightly. But his belly gets bigger and bigger throughout the night of Christmas Eve as he swallows more and more bad little children. The faces of his victims can sometimes be seen protruding through his stomach.

"He doesn't actually have a beard either; he froths at the mouth so badly that it only looks like he has one. The whites of his eyes are yellow

and he sharpens his teeth making it easier to chew the flesh from children's bones.

"The red coat he wears wasn't always red too you know. It was stained by the blood of his victims.

He is now more creature than man; snarling, with large razor sharp claws that extend his fingers. That's why they call him Santa *Claws*."

I turned back again to the Santa on the coffee table. Wanting to see the rosy cheeked man I knew. Wanting to forget about the image she had just described. But now the coffee table Santa looked more menacing than before. As if it was trying to hide something. Trying to hide the hunger inside.

"Your only hope is to pray that he has had his fill for the night, when he comes knocking at your door. Because then he only drags you from your bed and takes you to his ice fortress, where you work building toys till the end of your days…….unless he gets hungry again."

Even though I knew she was behind me, it still made me jump when she stood up. She moved over to the books lying on the floor and started putting them back on the shelf.

Why didn't anyone tell me about this? I would have done better. Been better. If I only knew the truth about Santa Claws.

"I'm only telling you this cause me and my sister were just like you. We were trouble makers back in the day. We used to play havoc with our parents. My sister was older than I was, so I used to follow her around, do what she did. We would get into all sorts of trouble. Towards the Christmas holidays we were especially bad.

Once, we cut our mothers hair when she was asleep. She woke up the next morning nearly bald. But each year we got presents, so we didn't care.

It was only till the Christmas after my sister's 6th birthday that I realized the consequences of our actions.

It was a normal Christmas Eve. We raced up to our room, after another day of terrorizing our parents, and jumped into are beds. My sister always had the bed closest to the window on Christmas Eve; she said she wanted to see Santa coming. Not that she ever did. I think if she had she wouldn't have wanted the window bed.

It didn't take long for both of us to fall asleep. We had been running around most of the day.

I don’t remember what I was dreaming about, but I know I was fast asleep when I heard her scream.

I shot up in bed, wondering what was wrong. It was only when my eyes adjusted to the light that I saw the devilish monster at the foot of my sisters bed. His boney claw grasped around my sister’s leg pulling her towards him. She struggled, she kicked, she clawed at her bed, but nothing helped. Inch by inch he pulled her closer and closer.

I was only young; I didn’t know what to do. I was so scared.

He lifted my sister up with one hand and opened his grotty sack with the other. Once {she was} inside, he closed the sack with a metal chain, to make sure she couldn’t get out.

I put my head under the covers, hoping it was all just a bad dream, shutting my eyes tight.

I heard my covers rip before I opened my eyes and saw his grotesque claw cutting through them.

I didn’t want to look, I shut my eyes again, but I could smell his breath as he got closer.

He didn’t attack me; I was five at the time. He only said: ‘I’ll see you next year’.

“Then I heard the jingling from the metal chains on his sack and the knocking of his hard black boots on the wooden floor as he left me in my bed. But what I remember most was the screams from my sister as she struggled in the sack.

“When I finally got the courage to open my eyes, the monster, his sack and my sister were gone.

I panicked. I thought I was going to be taken away too. Or worse eaten! I didn’t know what to do?”

“Did….did he come back for you?”

“He did, but I was good all year. I helped with putting things away and wasn’t rude or mean to anyone. I didn’t cause any trouble throughout the whole year.

When it finally came to the night of Christmas Eve I tried to sleep in my bed, hoping that the monster wouldn’t come and visit me in my sleep. That I had done enough to avoid his fiery wraith. I was up half the night, praying that I wouldn’t feel his razor sharp claws around my legs.

I don’t know when I finally got to sleep. All I remember is the light hitting my eyes as it peaked through the curtains the next morning. I had

woken up on Christmas day.

I thought he must have forgotten me, being as there are so many children in the world. But then I saw it. A crumpled old piece of paper sitting on the side of my desk. It hadn't been there last night.

I reached for the old brown paper, noticing the blood stains as I opened it.

And all that was written on it was two words. Two small words that scared me more than anything else in my life."

Again I was afraid to ask, what could these words be? Did I want to know?

"Next year". She didn't give me a choice. "Next year is all he put. And from that moment on each year I have been trying to be a good person and not find out what's waiting for me next year".

The room seemed darker when she finished. As if her story had scared some of the light out of the room.

My eyes started to water as my vision became blurred. The toy desk Santa stood as he always did, but through my tears I could see what she had described. His menacing features, his razor sharp teeth, and those hungry eyes.

"Will….sniff…..will he comes for me?"

"Well that depends, have you been a good boy this year?"

I knew the answer but I couldn't say it "sniff….yeah."

"Then you have nothing to worry about. Although helping me out around the house would improve your chances".

***

I wanted to cry. I wanted to just sit down on the floor and call for my dad to give me a hug and protect me from Santa Claws. But I knew I had to keep moving. Had to keep cleaning the house. There was only a few more hours before I had to go to bed. Before Santa comes and decides whether I am naughty or nice. The clock over the fireplace had just chimed 7 times when I finished cleaning up all the mess I had made. I asked my sitter if that was enough to be put on the 'nice list'. All she replied was "maybe, if you want to risk it. But if you wanted to…" and she would give me another task to do.

I heard the clock chime 9 times when I finished cleaning the kitchen and the living room and tidied my bedroom. When I finally got back to the living room, my sitter was lying on the sofa, watching TV and talking to someone on her phone.

"Oh, it worked a treat, I've got him doing all the house work and…." She trailed off when she noticed me standing there.

"I've finished tidying my bedroom", the toy Santa on the table still stared at me "will, um… will I be on the nice list now".

"Maybe", she smiled, "but I am rather thirsty, could you get me a glass of water?"

"Oh… kay".

"How *nice* of you".

It only took me a couple of seconds to get the glass of water and come back to her. She shook her arm pointing to where she wanted me to place it. She pointed right next to the Santa on the table.

I knew he wasn't the real Santa, just some dancing, singing toy. But I still felt uneasy as I placed the glass down next to it. I stared at it, as if it was going to do something, say something, but it didn't move.

Then I heard a jingle come from outside the front door. I turned quickly, accidentally knocking over the water onto the Santa. My sitter shouted in surprise and anger as she stood up to avoid the spilt water.

The Santa sparked, and started to slowly dance. It sang too, but its speech was slower and deeper than I had remembered it.

"You better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I'm telling you why,
Santa Clause is com…in..g."

The song stopped with another spark.

The jingling sound before had become louder as the person moved closer to the door. I could also hear shouting, not from my sitter, no this was an older voice; a man's voice. He was screaming at someone.

Maybe its Santa, maybe he had come for me. But I've been good, I did what my sitter wanted me to do.

The front door opened and the voice became clearer.

"Look, Nick. I don't care that it's Christmas or that your wife left you. I'm not having a drunken Santa in my mall. So you're fired. End of."

Even though he was angry, a smile grew on my face when I recognized my dad's voice. He came into the living room and ended his phone call.

"Sorry, Work." His voice was softer than before as he waved his phone in front of us "what happed here?"

My sitter must have gone to the kitchen and got some paper towels as she was now mopping up the split water in front of us.

"He accidentally spilt some water, that's all. No harm done, but I think you might want to buy a new dancing Santa".

"Not to worry, don't fuss yourself with that, I bet you want to go home, Santa's coming soon".

"Ha-ha, right Mr. Peterson."

"Please call me Jeff". He started looking around the house, "wow, you did a good job. The place hasn't looked tidier. How has he been?"

"He's been a *good* boy".

A 'good' boy she said. Me good. Maybe I've done enough; Santa won't come and get me while I sleep.

"Good. He didn't terrorize you. I was actually surprised. He normally wrecks the place and I get a call from his babysitter before I get home."

"No, nothing I couldn't handle".

"Well if I'd have known he would take a shine to you I wouldn't have rushed home so fast." He reached into his pocket and got his wallet out. "Here this is what I owe you and here's a little extra for doing such a good job".

"Wow, thanks Mr. Peter….um Jeff."

"You're welcome, now go home, it's late. Oh and Merry Christmas".

"Merry Christmas". She collected her things and went to the front door. Before she left she turned to me "Be good, Santa's coming".

"What a nice girl" my dad said, closing the door after her. "Now, you young man it's time for bed. Santa will be here soon".

I tried to take as much time as I could; getting changed and brushing my teeth. Maybe a little too long as my dad was getting angry.

"Come on you've been so good with the babysitter. You don't want to be naughty before Santa arrives do you?"

I started to speed up and was in bed moments later.

"Dad, what if we leave the fire on down stairs, will Santa still be able to get down the chimney?"

My dad came over and tucked me in tight. “Don’t worry he has a fire proof suit and boots”.

“What if the roof is icy and he can’t land?”

“His sleigh is equipped with the latest in anti-slipping technology, he can land anywhere”.

“What if we sleep somewhere else, maybe at Granddad’s place?”

“Why would we…hmm? Look, just don’t worry; he has a plan for everything. There is nothing that will stop him getting to you tonight”.

But I didn’t want Santa to visit tonight.

“Now get some sleep” he looked at his wrist watch “Wow, it’s nearly 11 o’clock, Santa will be here any moment and he knows if you are sleeping or not”.

He moved to my bedroom door. “Goodnight son”. With that he turned my bedroom light off and shut the door behind him, leaving me in darkness. The only light in my room was the moonlight that cut its way through my curtains. Normally a light helps me go to sleep, but on this night the moonlight just seemed to make my toys around me look scary. I pulled the covers over my head and curled up tight. Safe in my fortress.

I had almost gotten to sleep when a roar came from downstairs. Something had smashed and I could hear shouting. My dad and someone else, both of them screaming at each other. I heard something else break and then it went quite. I pulled the covers tighter over my head. Is it him? Has he come for me? I heard creaking as someone crept up the stairs. Someone was coming for me.

My bedroom door opened and I heard someone slither inside.

“Ho, ho, ho”’.

No it can’t be Santa, I was good, I was good.

I hoped he wouldn’t see me but I couldn’t help but shake under my covers. I told myself that I had to keep still. That I had to hide. But something tugged at my covers.

“NO” I yank them back.

But they were too strong, I couldn’t hold on to them anymore. He pulled the covers off me in one swift pull.

“There you are. You’re coming with me”.

***

“Rise and shine, sleepy head”. Santa’s boney fingers smashed across my father’s face, “WAKE UP”.

My father, dazed, saw me standing across from him. He looked broken and beaten, with no energy, but as he saw the long metal claw Santa had placed against my throat his eyes widened in fear.

“Son!” he tried to move with whatever energy he had left, but it was no use. Santa had my father tightly to his chair.

“No, shush. Stay still”, Santa pressed the cold bladed claw into my throat. With his over hand he pulled at the back of my hair, forcing my head upwards. “Now you wouldn’t want me to slip would you?”

“Don’t hurt him, please. Don’t hurt my boy”. I felt the cold bladed claw move from my throat and the monster allowed my head to fall forward.

My father’s face was red. Nearly as red as Santa’s blood stained suit.

His face was filled with anger. But his eyes were filled with tears. I had never seen him like this before.

“I don’t want to hurt the boy; he’s been a good boy.” He suddenly thrust his metal claw past my eye and sliced the air in front of me, pointing towards my father. “But you! You have been very naughty. Haven’t you?”

“I…um, who are you?” It was very dark where we were. I couldn’t tell myself. Santa had brought us here in the boot of my dad’s car and before we had even got in there he had blindfolded us both.

“Don’t you recognize this place?” suddenly some Christmas lights came on, lighting the place up. It looked like we were in a winter wonder land. He had taken us to the North Pole!

“Wait, this is my grotto. The one in my shopping centre”.

“My grotto you mean. The one you stole from me”.

“Nick?”

“This is my grotto” his hand grasped tighter around my hair again, “and you took it away from me. You stole it. I lost my wife, my kids and my job all because of you”.

“I didn’t take your wife and kids away, you drove them away”.

“YOU STOLE THEM!” the metal claw swiftly moved back to throat. “You took everything from me, now I’m going to take everything away from you”.

I felt the claw pierce my skin, only a small slice, but enough to make me cry. Tears formed in my eyes.

“WAIT, please” the metal claw stopped. “What is it that you want? Tell me, I’ll do anything. Just please, let my son go.”

“What I want is my life back.”

“You can have it”. My dad’s face was quivering, he was smiling but he was far from happy. “Just let the boy go and I’ll give you your old job back right now.”

“I don’t want my old job back. I want yours. Your shopping centre, everything you own”.

“Fine” my dad said instantly “just let him go. You don’t need him, you have me”.

“I thought you would say that”. Santa reached under the Christmas tree next to me and pulled from under it a stack of paper. They looked like the stacks of paper my dad has in his office. I think he called them ‘contracts’.

He dropped the contract down on the table the other side of me with a bang and then placed a feathery pen on top of it.

“You are going to sign the shopping centre over to me.”

“Fine, just release my son”.

“Not until you sign the document”.

“I”, he took a heavy breath. He seemed tired “I can’t. My hands are bound; you need to untie me”.

“Fine, but don’t try anything stupid”. Santa moved away from me and moved around my father. I reached up to my neck and felt the warm drops of blood coming from the small groove in it.

The bladed claw sliced through the air towards me “Now you be a good boy and don’t move”.

“Son, are you alright?” I could only nod “You’re going to be ok. Just do everything I say and you will be ok. You have to be a good boy for daddy ok. A brave boy”.

My eyes were pouring with tears and my nose streamed as I tried to breath. I wiped away as much as I could on my sleeve and then nodded again. “Ok, daddy”.

Santa cut the last rope that tied my dad’s hand behind him. My dad moved his hand in front of himself and grasped them, as if they were aching. He then smiled at me sweetly, reassuring me that it truly was going to be ok.

“Now, get up and sign it”. Santa shoved his hand on my dad’s back, trying to force him up.

“Just remember son, I love you.” He stood up slowly, taking a deep breath. “NOW RUN!”

My dad pushed himself back against Santa, smashing him into a wall. The action shocked me. I could only stand watching the scene as my dad attacked Santa. My dad threw punches, while Santa sliced the air around him. My dad grabbed him, dodging the bladed claw and threw Santa into the wall again.

My dad must have seen me in the corner of his eye ‘cause he turned away from Santa and looked at me “RUN SON, RUN!!!”

With my dad focused on me, Santa got up and pierced my dad’s belly. Blood replaced the words in my dad’s mouth.

“Daddy!”

Santa looked at me and smiled a sinister smile. I was scared.

But then I remembered what my dad had said: ‘run’.

My legs moved as fast as they could, away from the grotto and away from Santa. After passing trees, plastic reindeer, plastic elves and a black curtain I found myself in my dad’s shopping centre. It was a large shopping centre with many exists; and I knew where the closest one was. I ran down past the food court and around the corner.

“Ohhhh, naughty boy!!!!!”

I heard Santa’s foot steps behind me; they were faster than mine. But it didn’t matter, I was close; I could see the exit. I ran down the long corridor and made it to the doors. I tugged on them with all my might, but they didn’t move. I tried and tried and tried but nothing. I turned around and could see the shadow stalking me. He moved like a predator coming in for the kill. His large razor sharp claw dripping the blood from his last victim.

He was getting closer and closer. When he reached me he roared and lifted his claw above my head.

He suddenly screamed. Jolted and wriggled and then foamed at the mouth. He was planning on eating me.

Then he lost his grip. His claw fell from his hand, turning into a knife as it reached the ground. He followed his knife and collapsed to the floor.

I couldn’t say what had happened until I noticed two wires attached to Santa’s back.

As I followed them up they led me to a policeman with a weird gun. “Are you ok kid?”

I didn’t know what to say? “Santa’s killed my dad”.

***

It had felt like forever when my grandparent arrived at the police station to pick me up. They were both smiling when I saw them, but they still seemed sad.

A few moments later and I was in their car, traveling to my grandparent’s house. They both kept asking me if I was ‘alright’ or if I ‘needed anything’ on the travel back. I couldn’t say ‘my dad’ so I just kept quiet.

I kept nodding in the long journey back and was half asleep when we finally arrived.

Granddad carried me out the car, into their house and up to their spare room.

‘Come on kiddo, you need to get some sleep’. He said as he tucked me in the bed.

“There you are all tucked in. Are you comfy?”

“Yes thank you”. My granddad moved to the door and turned off the light.

“Goodnight, kiddo”.

“Granddad wait! Um, can you, can you move the Santa please.”

A festive Santa doll was sitting next to me on the bed side desk. It was the only thing on there, standing proud by itself. It looked happy in the light but when the lights went out the monster appeared.

“Sure thing”. It was gone from my sight in moments. My granddad was about to leave again, but he paused. “You know kiddo. That man…that evil man wasn’t Santa. You do know that, don’t you?”

“I know”. I knew the real Santa wouldn’t have been taken down so easily.

“Good, now get some rest. And if you need me I’ll be just down the hall”.

After that the door closed and I was left in darkness. It didn’t take me long to get to sleep. I was too tired to think about anything that had happened to me, or the fact I would never see my dad again.

It was Boxing Day when I finally woke up. The light poking through the curtains rested on my face.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to it. When they finally did I saw a crumpled old piece of paper sitting on the side of the desk, where the Santa doll was yesterday. It hadn't been there last night.

I grabbed the old brown paper and noticed it was covered in dark red stains. I opened it and saw two words written on it. Two little words that scared me more than what had happened to me on Christmas Eve.

It said: 'Next Year'.

Aichmophobia

Bruce H Markuson

“Here Galina, let me take you plate.” I said to my cousin as I took her plate and silverware. The banquet hall was just filling with wedding guest. All the tables were covered with white linen tablecloths. People were sitting down as food was being served.

I told the waiter. “Galina over there at the corner table is a special needs child who is scared of things. Please give me her plate at a separate table and I will cut up her meat for her.”

The waiter replied, “Of course ma'am.”

Galina and I were only twelve years old. I was not used to being called ma'am.

Then I hear a familiar voice in a very sarcastic tone. “What she scared of. Is the little girl afraid.”

It was Butch and his gang from my neighborhood. They were five sixteen-year-old boys all good for nothing bullies and troublemakers. It’s only because they were related to the groom that they were at the wedding

“Butch, leave her alone!” I screamed at him.

“Why, what's wrong with her?” He continued in his sarcastic tone as he stole a bottle of brandy from behind the bar.

“She has Aichmophobia, a fear of knifes and sharp things. When she was young her parents strapped her to a large round wooden board. Then they spun her around as they threw knifes at her. That was considered prime entertainment in the Russian circus. She’s only twelve years old and was declared mental incompetent. Now she’s going through intensive psychotherapy.”

“What a freak show.” He said.

“The courts have given my family custody of her. So you had better leave her alone.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll tell everyone about the brandy you’ve stolen.”

“Oh, I’m so scared.” He continued in his sarcastic voice as he walked away. I thought the five of them were going to sneak off somewhere and have a little drinking party. I should have known better. I should have told someone else.

The waiter brought me the plate. ”Here you go ma'am. As you requested.” He put the plate on a separate table away from Galina. I walked over and started cutting her meat.

The waiter looked over my shoulder and said. “What are those boys doing with handful’s of steak knives?”

I heard butch yell from Galina’s table. “Hey Galina, surprise.”

“Holy shit!” I screamed. “God help us.”

Clank, clank, clank, clank, clank

Galina screamed. “AH!!!!!!”

Thwat, thwat, thwat, thwat, thwak.

It was only then that I turned around and saw all five of them had a steak knifes dead center in their throat.

I told butch as he was grabbing the knife at his bloody throat. “She was also a very skilled knife thrower herself at the circus. She killed both of her parents.”

The Wait

M. Leon Smith

"Do you want fries with that?"

John glanced down at his expansive stomach. *Did he look like he needed fries?* Of course not! But that wasn't the question the pretty teen at the drive thru window had asked. No. She asked if he *wanted* fries.

The answer, of course, turned out to be yes. John nodded. The fat which had encircled his once handsome face jiggled, jumping like an excited puppy at the return of its master. That summed up his problem he thought. He always *wanted* something else. Fries or onion rings or another burger or-

"I'll have a strawberry shake too. Large."

"Is that instead of the Coke?"

It should be, thought John. *It* really *should.* "No. As well as."

John justified his choice to himself. He'd ordered four burgers and a large fries. He *needed* Coke to wash them all down. The shake was dessert. Everyone was entitled to a dessert, *right?*

The girl serving him took his money and told him to collect his order from the next window. As John reached for his food, his shirt popped open below his navel. He had worn his loosest top he owned for his appointment but even this proved inadequate. He would need to go up another size and add an X to the growing line of them on his labels.

John pulled into the nearest space in the parking lot, John dug out the first of his four Big Macs from the brown paper bag and took a huge bite from the greasy burger, cramming almost half into his mouth. John groaned happily. He was starving. The fact he had stopped for breakfast at a roadside café a little over an hour ago didn't cross his mind.

In between large chomps of Big Mac John took hefty swigs of Coke. He let a massive burp out, the deep rattle filling his car. The salty fries disappeared into his mouth next at a similar speed.

John checked his watch. He had thirty minutes to drive across town. He thought he had enough time to make the journey. He put the car in gear and drove off, the shake in his left hand and the steering wheel grazing his massive gut.

Traffic was awful. Every learner driver, pensioner with a fear of speed and asshole who didn't think indicators existed filled the road. By the time he got to the doctor's office he sweating profusely and red in the face from road rage induced shouting.

He struggled out the car door and got to his feet uneasily. At last he noticed the unfastened button, John decided to check his appearance. The large drop of Big Mac sauce had ran into his belly button. John swallowed the tasty goo up after cleaning his navel with his index finger. *Lucky,* he thought as he fastened his shirt. *If the button had been closed, I'd be wearing the sauce too.*

The walk to the surgery from the car park was short but uphill. The mild incline robbed John of his breath. Worse still, stairs led up to the front door. To the left of the stairs a wheelchair ramp sloped gently up. John always refused to take ramps. He was a little chucky, he always said, not disabled. By the time he reached the stairs the pain deep within his stomach almost enough dropped him to the floor. John took the easier route.

He needed to get to the toilet - fast. The griping, clutching pain in his bowels meant only one thing. He sat a second before a watery flood of foul-smelling shit left his body and splashed into the bowl. A grunt escaped him involuntarily.

Richard hated going to see the doctor. Medical professionals were single minded in their approach in his experience. One look and they blamed his weight for everything.

"My leg hurts."

"Try losing weight, you're putting a lot of strain on your joints."

"I have chest pains."

"Try losing weight, you're putting a lot of strain on your heart."

"I jammed my hand in a car door."

"It's not broken but you should try-"

And so on…

John imagined what the last quack was going to say before their previous appointment.

"You have a sore stomach? Have you tried putting less food into it?"

Doctor James had been different. For a start he was more than a little chubby himself. Secondly he listened. He had also taken blood and performed a rectal exam which had left John feeling both humiliated and vindicated.

“Hi,” he said to the receptionist. “I’m here to see Dr James.”

“Name?” she asked without even looking up from the paperwork in front of her.

“It’s Mr. Hindmarsh. John,” he said, glancing at the clock behind the woman. “I’m a little late. Sorry.”

The receptionist looked up from the computer with an expression of surprise and disgust which she struggled to disguise. “The doctor will be able to fit you in but there may be a wait. Or you could reschedule?”

The thought of spending hours in the doctor’s office almost convinced John to book another appointment as the receptionist had offered. Another wave of pain in his stomach forced him to change his mind and stay. “No, that’s fine.”

The pain became agony, as though someone had grabbed his intestines and put them through a mangle. John’s knees buckled.

“Are you okay?” asked the worried woman behind the counter.

“Excuse me.”

John hurried back to the toilet. For the second time in minutes his stomach voided itself of a foul smelling slurry. John fought back tears. *How could he go on like this?*

To John’s dismay the waiting room almost bulged with people queued up to be examined by the doctor. The only seat remaining was a cheap plastic chair with thin aluminum legs. John sighed. He sat and the whole thing sagged a little as the metal legs splayed.

Across from him sat a harried looking mother with a baby and two toddlers. One of the young children, a boy, stared at John in amazement. He span around to tell his embarrassed parent about the fat man in an excited voice.

John pretended not to hear.

The agony in his stomach had dulled to a background roar of discomfort. John shifted in his chair to try to get some relief but the way it lurched worried him enough to stop. Try as he might to ignore the websites he had visited the night swam before his eyes. He wished he had controlled the urge to Google his symptoms.

Sitting in darkened back bedroom staring at his laptop’s screen was nothing new to John but he usually looked at a more adult websites. The information he read scared him half to death. Condition after condition was revealed in bald facts with nothing in way of context.

Irritable bowel syndrome, allergies, food poisoning, an aortic aneurysm, gallstones, divertculitis, or ulcers. He might have any one of them… *or all.* Those diseases weren't even the worst. John forced himself not to think about what diagnosis may be waiting for him.

Boredom soon took hold. John fished his phone from his pocket he started to play the games on the scratched screen but after a few minutes the battery warning flashed so he stopped playing. The scant collection of crumpled magazines, with topics which appealed to old women didn't grab his attention. A small TV hung from the wall. John's spirits lifted until he realized it only showed a slideshow of information the NHS thought vital to know. After John read each page he was left with nothing but his own thoughts for entertainment.

If forced to predict what was wrong John supposed he would choose irritable bowels. The way he had to rush to toilets would not be the work of a calm bowel, he thought. His uncle had suffered from the condition for years and apart from avoiding certain foods it didn't impact his life too much. *But what if it was-*

No! John wouldn't allow himself to think that way.

He discounted the idea of food poisoning. The diarrhea had been going on for far too long. He toyed with the idea he might be allergic to something. He had never suffered from allergies in all his fifty four years but they can come on at any time. *Yeah, but remember it could be-*

No!

A sudden allergy seemed a bit far-fetched, John admitted to himself. So if he had no allergies and his bowel was not angry at anything then what? Certainly not divertculitis. From what he read, a lack of fiber caused the condition and he ate plenty of that. Hell, he ate plenty of everything! *You know how your Dad-*

No! Stop!

Behind his passive exterior John was at war. Thoughts of what might be competed with memories twenty years old. With so many conditions to choose from, it was unlikely it was *that* one, lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice.

But cancer can run in families.

Hush! We don't talk about that!

John stifled his urge to scream in anger. Arguing with someone else and a Smart Alec living in your own head, speaking with the same voice as

you did, proved to be a different experience.

You've always known this was possible.

Shut up!

You're not the healthiest person.

So now I'm going to tell myself to lose weight?

Without meaning to John let a single staccato snort of a laugh out. All the years of being told he *must* lose weight had finally worn him down. Even his own thoughts bullied him to change.

But what if?

The memories his brain tried to dredge up from the recesses of his mind, where he had hidden them two decades were too awful. If he allowed himself to go down that route would reopen old yet barely healed wounds.

It could be-

Okay! I know, okay!

There had been days when John had wished his Dad would pass away. Simply stop breathing and die. Not because he hated him but because death would have been kinder to him. At night, when his tears fell in an unending torrent, John wanted to take the pillow and help Dad find peace.

Doctors fought to keep him alive as though breathing itself could somehow be enough. For all their training, John thought no-one had ever taught them the difference between living and existing. Each breath inhaled deemed a victory. Each exhalation, a war won. An incorrect conclusion.

Both John and his Dad were aware that the perceived victory was pyric at best. *A dog would have been put out of his misery by now,* thought John. But no, Dad was human so not allowed that most basic of respect.

He had to lie in the hospital bed, surrounded by doctors, nurses and other cancer patients. Wires to monitor him, tubes to remove bodily waste, a mask to force oxygen into his wrecked body.

Morphine flowed into his veins like water down a gutter. "*It'll make him comfortable*" the constant refrain. John knew he wasn't comfortable. He had the ability to have whole conversations with the man who was dying in front of him without talking and a single look in the lucid moments conveyed everything to John.

Dad wasn't comfortable. His discomfort had nothing to do with the colorectal cancer eating him from the inside out. He had been active all of his life. It was rare a day went by without him spending the majority of his time outside. He loved to walk or cycle or swim. The cancer had taken that

all from him. It had taken the countryside and fresh air and replaced them with drugs and hospital walls.

Cancer had stolen the sky from him.

In the waiting room John sensed his own sky receding. In his mind he plainly envisioned his own fate. Constant pain, endless drugs, more needle marks on his body than a heroin addict. A slow, relentless death. *A cancer death.*

"Mr. Hindmarsh, please," said a voice across the tannoy system.

John struggled to his feet to receive his diagnosis.

In the Mouth of the Chasm

Brian Barnett

I heard once the theory concerning certain species that had sensed their own extinction. Perhaps I heard it in high school or college. Or maybe I heard it on a television program, not that it really matters. If the theory is correct, it must not apply to humankind, for I'm seemingly the only one who anticipates what is about to happen.

Staring out my window from this hospital bed, I cannot help but to pity the doctors and nurses. They are too busy with their everyday duties, stuck in a familiar comfort of mundane normality. They swoop in and out of my room, ask their questions, grant me an occasional patronizing nod or smile and then leave again without even the slightest concern as to what I *really* have to say.

I know they think I'm insane. Perhaps I am.I'm almost certain as soon I'm physically well enough, I'll be put away in a facility where I will be monitored. They'll think my experience in the cave caused me to go insane. They'll think I killed the others. Well, they'll soon see. When IT surfaces and the reckoning begins they'll think back to when I tried to warn them. Not that it will matter.

The horror replays in my head constantly. It always begins with my good friend and former associate, Bill Jones. He had completely lost his mind, the poor man. I was fortunate. Somehow I was able to retain my mental faculties long enough to escape with my life, such that it is or can ever be anyway. He, in his catatonic state, may be the luckiest man I know come to think about it. After all, he may not have to bear witness to the end.

I may only have time to tell the full story once, so I will be as detailed as possible. Perhaps in telling this story, there may be some clue as to how to stop the end from coming. However, not even by the grace of God may we be saved, I'm afraid.

It all began yesterday afternoon when Bill and I received a call from the local authorities. A farmer's cow had fallen into a crevasse in nearby Shelby County. According to the farmer, he had been "settling in" for the evening when he saw his cow collapse into the ground, or rather, it was consumed by the ground, almost as if the earth had opened up and swallowed it whole.

After a few calls to various government agencies, the authorities decided that we were the experts in such matters since we were the only speleologists in the area.

The county officials wanted Bill and me to inspect the crevasse. They wanted to know why it had seemingly materialized from nowhere and if a repeat event was inevitable.

From our initial examination of the area, we only found small hole. The bulk of fields that made up the farm were comprised of large rolling hills covered with green vibrant grass and purple and blue wildflowers. The spot we examined was scarcely different. Only a small hole, barely large enough for two people, stared back at us like a black gaping eye.

I asked the farmer, Mr. Randolph Charles, as his mailbox prominently read, if he was unequivocally sure that the hole had not always been there.

"I know this property better than you know your own wife!" He grunted at me as if I had slighted his honor as a hard-working man of the land. I didn't have the heart or moxie to tell him I was not married.

Bill and I started our work right away. We hired a team comprised of our well-seasoned caving colleagues. They were thrilled by the opportunity to explore a previously unmarked cave system. I was the one who shared their excitement. Bill was apprehensive.

Somehow he knew something wasn't right. He tried to prove to me that the crevasse hadn't always been there. "I just absolutely cannot believe that it has remained undiscovered all this time. I seriously doubt that this is a natural cave system. Something about it is just not sitting right with me. Can't you *feel* that? Something's *off*."

Of course at the time I merely laughed-off his gloomy disposition. Admittedly, I had slight reservations about lowering myself into the crevasse. But in my defense, nearly all the caves I'd explored over the years gave my nerves a bit of a spike. This one did seem different. I felt it, sure, but not like Bill felt it. I eventually concluded that my own apprehension was born from his obvious tension.

Yet still, we descended.

Roy Parks barked on his radio from deep down below Bill and me. We couldn't see him. His voice reverberated slightly off the water-slick crevasse walls. "No gasses present. It's safe." Roy's youthful enthusiasm came through very clearly in his radio-distorted voice.

I watched Bill closely. He seemed to grow even more noticeably nervous as we prepared his descent. His responses to questions became tight, one-word mumbled grunts. His hands shook slightly as he attached his karabiners. At times, I even noticed a slight tremble to his bottom lip. Never before had I seen him so nervous during an exploration.

"Are you sure you want to go down?" I asked him, "We can relay what we find by radio if you prefer to stay up."

"I'm fine!"

His eyes had narrowed and his lip no longer quivered from fear, but from rage. I dropped the subject immediately.

It took nearly a full half-hour before we finally touched solid ground again. We took the utmost precaution. Uncharted caves tend to be finicky toward new visitors. The crevasse had widened considerably by the time we had touched down. It nearly resembled the inside of a massive teapot. Our helmet-mounted lanterns revealed a vast, cavernous chamber. Its wax-like water-filmed walls shimmered slightly as our halogen beams skimmed across them. The skylight from the entrance bled out onto the upper walls but faded long before it reached us.

I heard Bill whisper to himself with trembling breath, "unbelievable."

I shared his sentiment. The fact that such a large chamber had never been discovered was indeed unbelievable. Within a few moments, we noticed several winding tunnels that webbed out from the main chamber like arteries from a heart.

"Okay folks!" I announced, "It looks like we have a brand new cave system to chart. Congratulations. Prepare to be famous."

A chorus of cheers echoed off the cavernous interior of the main chamber. Bill still appeared troubled. I tried to console him. I patted his shoulder with a congratulatory smile. He stared at me with hollow eyes as if his mind was somewhere else. Then he started suddenly as if I had awoken him from a terrifying daydream.

He asked with a slight quake in his voice, "Where's the cow?"

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I did my best to calm Bill. I tried to reason with him that the cow must have somehow wandered away. Perhaps the fall had not injured it, or perhaps even if it was injured, it could've dragged itself into one of the tunnels.

It took a few moments to convince my team there was nothing out of the ordinary. “Stranger things have happened.” I think is what I said.

Eventually, despite a slight feeling of dread in the air, we entered our first tunnel. Our lanterns managed to cut through the darkness just long enough for us to pass though. Then it bled back across the walls as if it was trying to envelope us.

The wall’s features were a bit strange, I thought. The angles of the walls were almost certainly unnatural. They seemed angular and smooth, as if they were not carved by water currents, but by humanlike ingenuity. I imagine my team had the same thoughts, yet no one shared them, at least not to me.

Derrick Barber made sure to mark our trail. He placed temporary flags along the corridor as we progressed. As we continued, side tunnels branched off from the main artery. All of them were of a uniform size. Without the markers, we would very easily have gotten disoriented.

As we continued further, I sensed the tension in the other men. It was as if we were somewhere that was not meant to be found. The cave was certainly not ordinary. The paths were too smooth. The walls were too straight. The lengths between the tunnels were too exact. Something was strange. We slowly began to realize we weren’t the cave’s first visitors.

After twenty minutes of walking through the tunnel, I halted the team. Something had piqued my ears. I wondered at first if it was falling rocks, dribbling water, or perhaps a scurrying cave animal, but the more I listened, the more I realized that it was a sound unlike any that I had ever heard.

Something up ahead in the darkness was...scratching. At least it sounded like scratching. The sound was similar to that of claws scraping across the stone walls and floor of the tunnel. A few of us had been in caves where bears or cougars had taken as shelter. That sound was not entirely alien; however, this sound was not quite the same. I strained my eyes into the darkness, but the source of the sound seemed to linger just beyond the reach of our lanterns.

I edged forward, closer to the sound. It silenced for a moment, and then quickly skittered upward toward the ceiling. I felt the team crowd perceptively closer to me, as if they felt more protected in a tight pack. Their breathing increased with ragged intensity. The light cone from my helmet seemed to reflect my own fear. The shadows danced as my entire body shook.

Then it happened. Behind me, a tearing of fabric and then Leslie Hammond gasped and shrieked. We turned toward him, and watched him disappear, thin white arms around him, through a small chasm in the wall. The light from his helmet bobbed and thrashed and steadily dimmed inside the chasm as he disappeared further into the void. We were all frozen with fear as we listened to his desperate pleas as they reverberated off the chasm's walls, "Oh my God! James, Bill, help me! Oh my G-"

As abruptly as it began, it had ended. The light in the chasm darkened as his voice silenced. Nausea rose to my chest. I felt light-headed. Suddenly, *absurdly* considering what we had just witnessed, my thoughts drifted to the cow. I realized that the cow had not merely disappeared. It had been snatched up by something – something in the cave. And just like the cow, our friend, Leslie was gone.

"We have to get out of here, *now*!" Bill was livid. His intense fear had melded with his mounting hatred toward the cave. He nearly spat with fury as he spoke. "We should never have come down here in the first place!"

"What about Leslie? We're just going to leave him here?" interjected Derrick. He was equally livid, only he was slightly more rational. He wanted to save Leslie, assuming he could be saved.

"If we don't get out of here, we'll all wind up just like him!" Bill answered, barely above a whisper. His bottom lip had begun trembling again.

I knew I had to speak up. I needed to keep the peace. If they all would have lost their focus, there was no telling what sort of danger we would have wound up in.

"Calm down!" I yelled, perhaps a little too forcefully. "Listen, I think we probably do need to surface," I noticed Derrick adamantly shaking his head, so I elevated my voice in an attempt to get through to him. "We need to get someone down here that can help. If he is hurt, we need somebody who can give him the proper medical attention that he needs."

"Think about what you are saying, James! If we leave him down here, he may die!"

"He's already dead."

Bill said it. He said it with a manner that was almost as morose as the word *dead*. He was almost passive about it. He just stared vacantly at the dark chasm in the wall. He had already made up his mind, what was left of it. He was going to leave with or without us.

“Well then go on, you cowards. I’ll stay here. I’ll go in after him. If you two want to save your own skins, that’s fine. Just don’t ever look me up for my help again.”

I hate to admit I was torn. I was almost sure Leslie was dead, just as Bill had mentioned so matter-of-factly, yet Derrick had a point. To leave Leslie behind would be a callous act that would devastate his family, so I stayed by the chasm against my better judgment.

Bill continued staring into the void with no expression. Derrick placed a flag in the mouth of the chasm as he edged in head first. Roy and I crouched to the floor to rest our quivering legs. I encouraged Derrick to be careful, but implored him to hurry. The scratching sound was noticeably closer.

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After much arguing, Bill finally set off into the darkness alone. He wanted no part of the cave anymore. I just sat with my back against the corridor wall opposite the chasm and watched as the light dimmed until it was finally consumed by the darkness. I felt anger well up in me. Perhaps it was out of jealousy. I wanted to leave the cave too, but as the team leader I was responsible for the other men. I knew at that moment that my business partnership with Bill had permanently ended.

“What do you think it was, James?” Roy’s voice startled me more than I’d like to admit.

“What was what?” I sighed.

He gestured with his half-empty canteen. “That, whatever that was that dragged Leslie into the hole over there.”

I tried to deny my own memory. I tried to forget that he was in fact dragged through the chasm. He hadn’t fallen. Not in the way that I’m attempted to remember it anyway.

“What do you mean?” I said, playing dumb. “I just saw the light from his helmet, and-”

“Oh, come off it!” he interrupted angrily. “You know as much as I do that something grabbed him. You heard his screams the same as I did. He’s fallen in caves before. In fact, he’s fallen in caves that you led us through before. I’ve never heard him like that. Never. And don’t you try to tell me that you have, because we both know that you haven’t!”

I could see that Roy was shaking. His canteen made a muted sloshing sound and he held it near his lips nervously. I allowed the silence between us to tell him all he needed to know about my thoughts. Of course I knew that something had grabbed Leslie. I just did not allow myself to fully believe it enough to say it aloud.

Then the scratching began again.

"And what is *that*?" yelled Roy, as if he were angered by the noise. "I swear that is nothing like any sound I've ever heard before."

Again, I said nothing. I just watched the dark chasm and hoped that Derrick would pop through at any moment so we could leave.

However my silent treatment had run its course. Roy wanted an answer. I suppose talking made him feel more secure and I wasn't taking part, so he lost his composure. He grabbed me by the collar and turned to me, livid, "You answer me!" Then his face immediately faded from anger and twisted to what reflected absolute horror. "Oh, God." He whimpered. He released me immediately and took another large, nervous swig from his canteen.

A frantic scratching sound scurried from behind me, as if a frightened animal had instinctively escaped a predator. Fear tightened my chest like burning steel claws. I turned, but saw nothing other darkness and hundreds of tiny dust particles that danced and fluttered in the light.

I turned back to Roy who continued staring past me with wide eyes. "What?" I demanded, calm but forceful. "What was it, Roy?"

He merely shook his head slowly with disbelief. His lips moved, but he made no sound.

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him angrily. "What was it, Roy?"

"A face." He swallowed hard. "A, sort of, face."

"You're not making any sense! What face?"

"It was a face!" he yelled, as if in desperation. "It was a face, but whiter than one that I've ever seen. It looked almost human, but it had no eyes. It didn't even have a place where eyes were supposed to be. It was just horrible." Roy looked as if he was bordering on a nervous breakdown.

The scratching came closer again, slower this time, as if the prey had returned to cautiously survey its territory.

The chasm slowly grew brighter. I distinctly heard Derrick's voice as he grunted to pull his weight up the narrow channel.

“Derrick, did you find anything?” I called down to him, trying to sound hopeful and filter out the desperation.

“Give me just a second. I have to show you something.”

I sat down uneasily beside Roy again, who continued to scan the darkness in the corridor. His eyes were wide and wary. He persisted to take dry sips from his empty canteen. I pitied him but I have to admit I understood his fear. I felt it too.

Within a few moments Derrick finally emerged from the chasm. His face was covered with mud and slime. He looked defeated.

“Leslie?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

He shook his head sadly.

“He was messed up pretty bad. Parts of him were missing somehow. His head was crushed. I think I have to agree with Bill. I think we should get out of here.”

“But you said that you had something to show us?”

He nodded and removed a grimy book from his side-pack. There very appearance of it sent a nearly paralyzing chill down my spine.

***

Against my better judgment, I skimmed through a few of the pages. The pages felt filmy between my fingers. I had handled many varieties of vellum and parchment, but those pages were far different. They were thick and almost spongy.

None of the texts were written in a language that I had ever seen. Some pages had bizarre pictographs and some others had crude drawings of unearthly creatures.

“There’s more.” Derrick swallowed hard and proceeded to pull a second book from his pack.

I found my self completely engrossed, but I was aware of the other two men’s apprehension toward staying any longer than we had to. “I’ll be just one more second.” I opened it immediately, feeling the pressure of their glares upon me.

“Can we not look at these on the surface?” asked Roy.

“Just give me another second.” I grunted through my teeth.

The second book was written in English! It looked to be a crude deciphering of the original book. I looked up to Derrick, who looked as if

he had turned green.

"We weren't the first ones here after all." He said. "James, I don't know who or what is in this cave, but I don't think we're welcome here."

His words didn't weigh as heavily as they should have. I was too amazed at his discovery. I thumbed through the pages, which were written on parchment that had tanned with age.

Quickly, I read some of the translated texts. The first notes that struck me were: *When the Black Veil blankets the sky*. *The ninth cycle? Dark...will reign*. Another, just below it read: *Mog-Moggoth shall ascend*.

I flipped to the next page and one of the crude drawings was recreated. The unearthly creature, surely of which no man alive has ever seen, was labeled – Mog-Maggoth.

The very sight of it, even in its raw hand-drawn form sickened me. It appeared to be immense, perhaps larger than any animal on earth. Its mouth was like that of an ant's, or a spider, maybe a combination of the two - mandibles with pincers and pedipalps.

Its body was made up of a form-fitting exoskeleton like that of a lobster, only its underside was soft and fleshy with dozens of spiny legs and two massive splotched forearms with tentacled finger-like appendages.

As I continued to flip ahead, I saw other renderings of the strange Mog-Maggoth. All were equally as hideous as the last.

I finally clasped the book closed, feeling nauseous. My mind cycled through the notes again. What was the Black Veil? What could the notes have meant by dark will reign?

My thoughts were interrupted by Roy and Derrick, who seemed to be frantically scanning the walls.

"What's going on?" I didn't need to ask. As soon as I opened my mouth, I heard it.

The scratching had returned. However, this time it seemed to be less subtle. It came from both directions.

"Oh my-" Roy's voice was immediately cut off.

The bulb in his helmet flashed bright blue and then extinguished. By the time Derrick and I looked over at him, he had fallen from the ceiling, or at least his body had.

We saw his headless body, lying in a heap on the cold cave floor. Blood shimmered from our lanterns as it spread into a wide puddle. I dropped the books. I unconsciously rubbed my palms against my pant legs.

I didn't want any more part in the cave or what it had to offer – especially the foreboding texts of the books.

Almost simultaneously, Derrick and I looked up to see something that I will never forget until the day I die, which I'm afraid, will be very soon.

The strange creature, in which Roy tried to describe to me earlier, was poised in a sitting position on the ceiling. As he had said, it was white – bleach white – and it had no eyes. It cowered away from the light, but not before I could see that its hands and feet consisted of talons. I noticed them as they scratched against the cave walls.

I found myself wondering. I wondered how these creatures came to be. They were so humanlike. Could it be that a small society of worshipers of Mog-Moggoth had lived into the cave for so many generations that they finally de-evolved into these disgusting creatures? Had they prepared their genetic make-up for the future when the world would be veiled in darkness as the notes had said? Or worse, had their "god" bestowed them with the abilities to live in absolute darkness and thrive in an environment that is nearly bereft of food sources? Had I seen the next generation and future of humankind?

Derrick yelped and jumped backwards. He looked down to see Roy's vacant eyes bulging upward at him.

***

Derrick and I ran. I sensed that he was just behind me on the left. I heard his breath and his footfalls as he kept pace with me. His lantern lit the left side of the corridor and melded with mine in the middle which occasionally reflected bright orange of the marker flags. We hoped that at any moment the corridor would open to the main chamber of the cave.

Suddenly the corridor dimmed slightly. The footfalls and heaving breaths had silenced. As I looked back, I saw several chalky-skinned creatures thrashing at Derrick with their talons. His lantern darkened. I'm afraid that the last moment that I saw him, where he struggled against those vile creatures, will forever be my most vivid lasting memory of the poor man.

As I turned forward again, I ran into Bill and sprawled headlong over him. He fell with me, or more accurately, he crumpled to the ground. He

didn't utter a sound when I collided with him. He didn't even exhale as if I had knocked any wind out of him.

"Bill? Why are you still here? I thought that you were going to the surface."

He stared at me with fear stained eyes. I'm not sure that he even realized who I was.

I noticed that he must have fallen on his way out of the corridor. His hands and face were bloody and scuffed and his helmet lantern had busted.

"I saw the eye." he said weakly. He sounded much older than forty-seven years old.

"The eye? What eye?" I asked passively as I tried to drag him up by his elbow.

"I saw the eye that will judge us and deem us unworthy."

Again I felt nauseous. I finally lifted him from the cold cave floor and walked him to where we first descended.

"Soon the ninth cycle shall be upon us. The Black Veil will blanket the sky. He shall ascend and judge us all. We will be unworthy to him and so we shall suffer."

I did my best to ignore him. I fastened his harness to mine and ratcheted us upward to the darkening skylight. Thin clouds had covered the sun slightly. My stomach rolled in response. I wanted nothing more than to see the cleansing light of the blazing sun where no bizarre creatures could rise from the depths of the earth to destroy humanity – if only for just a little while longer.

"-we shall all perish. We shall all suffer." Bill's last words brought me back to terror. They were words that could not be ignored, at least not by me.

"Where did you hear that?" I demanded, more angrily than I could contain. "Where did you come up with these ludicrous yarns?" I didn't want to know. By asking him, I hoped to deny what he was saying could be true. I wanted him to be silent and to prove to me that he had merely lost him mind while wondering the depths of the cave alone and in the dark after his mind had already come dangerously close to collapsing. But what he said only made feel ill, as if the struggle to survive and to escape the cave was only a feeble attempt to escape the inevitable.

"I saw it in his eye. *He* told me. He trusted me with the truth. Perhaps if I serve him properly, he will spare me." Bill smiled weakly, before his

eyes lolled and fluttered.

I stopped ratcheting us upward and lightly slapped his cheeks. “Who told you? Who told you, Bill?”

“He! He, who will destroy the world, Mog-Moggoth!” Again Bill smiled, but only briefly before his head dropped weakly, allowing his chin to rest against his chest.

I heard scratching below. The walls were alive with the vile beasts that had murdered Leslie, Roy and Derrick. They were racing up the walls toward us to stop us from exposing them to the world.

There were only a few feet to go until the skylight would protect us. I furiously cranked the ratchet and lifted us jerkily toward the faint glow of the mouth of the cave. The scratches drew closer, more intense. Their desperation matched my own. It was a race against wills.

Finally, my face was bathed with warm light and the thick, damp air from the surface. Below, I heard shrill shrieks. Thin rays of light had filtered past my shoulders and washed the evil wall-climbers with cleansing wholesome sunlight.

One by one, I heard them thud against the cave floor. I loved every moment. I hoped that their bones shattered and that they suffered terribly.

Just as I reached the surface, two local policemen who had stood by, helped Bill out of the hole. His face had taken a shade of blue and his lips seemed to be frothing slightly. That was the last that I saw of him. What was once a strong, energetic man is now just a pitiful damp rag.

I wanted to warn them all. I wanted to shout to the farmer that he needed to move as far away as could. I wanted to tell the authorities to load the cave with dynamite to obliterate the abominations that centuries of de-evolution had created.

But just after Bill was taken from the cave and strapped to a gurney, a sharp pain registered from my lower left leg. I felt the bones snap like dried twigs. The flesh and muscle severed even easier. I felt blinding pain just before my overexerted body finally gave out. I lost consciousness.

At some point, I was brought to this hospital. Twice I was interviewed by the police. They wanted to know why three men were missing. They wanted to know what took my leg. But most of all, they wanted to know why my friend, Bill, just stared at the ceiling and mumbled to himself.

I can tell them why. In fact, I *did*. But all I got in response were threats and hostility. So now I just sit here, and I watch the billowing clouds

as they lumber by slowly. I will enjoy the last days of sunlight, for I don’t know when the end is coming, but I know that it will be soon.

Happiness Comes in Small Packages

Brian Barnett

It had been another terrible day at school. Whitney Cartwright had rallied another crowd of schoolmates to laugh mercilessly at Greta's expense.

Day in and day out, it was always the same. Greta Howard would show up to school and sit by herself, quietly, hoping to be left alone – hoping to make it through the day without being humiliated and ridiculed. She would avoid eye contact with the other girls who she often overheard whispering hurtful lies about her. She wanted nothing more than to be ignored, yet inevitably Whitney would seek her out and torment her.

Today Whitney had slapped Greta's school books out of her hands. A dingy book titled 'A Wiccan History, Religion and Spells' that Greta had checked out from the library slid out from between her science and math books for everyone to see.

Of course Whitney immediately snatched it up, instantly arming herself with all new insults to fling at Greta. She held it high and waved it around to make sure that everyone could see it. Then she rifled through the pages until she found the love charms that Greta had bookmarked.

"Oh my God!" Whitney had said several decibels louder than Greta was comfortable with, "The freak wants to find its mate!" She laughed at her own joke. The wannabe popular kids joined along with her in a cackling chorus. They all laughed, pointed, and doubled over as tears formed in their eyes.

At times Whitney's jokes fell flat, allowing Greta to shrug them off and ignore the muted laughter in the classrooms and hallways. Other times, like this one, Whitney went out of her way to completely humiliate Greta. As usual in these particular cases, Whitney was successful. Greta wanted to die on the spot. She reflected on how she had hesitated to check out the book. She knew that there was a possibility for Whitney to find it. But she checked it out anyway after curiosity got the best of her. Greta noticed more and more students joining the circle around Whitney. One at a time, they each joined in the expanding mosaic of hoarse, wheezing faces. She'd had enough. Whitney was successful, any self esteem Greta had for the day was completely drained.

Greta snatched the book from Whitney and retreated to her class. Her face felt as if it was on fire. She strained against the urge to cry, biting into her lip to distract herself from the oncoming tears. She received several awkward, sideways glances from students who were expecting for her to explode at any moment. She did her best to ignore them. She thought that they almost seemed to want her to cry. Maybe it would give them something to tell Whitney so that she could have yet one more thing to tease her about. As she stepped into the classroom, she realized that she tasted blood.

She sat down in self-prescribed seclusion in the far corner of the classroom and stared down at her desk. Her black hair fell over her porcelain-colored face that remained splotched with red, flushed patches that reflected her hurt and anger. She preferred to keep hidden behind those bangs until class was over, taking only minimal solace knowing that the thin stringy veil would do nothing to stop the whispering girls across the classroom. She thought that she already saw them leaning toward one another, probably commenting on Whitney's latest spectacle. Muffled snickers followed by not-too-subtle shushes confirmed the assumption.

For the rest of the day, Whitney persisted to shout boys' names from around the school at random. She would pull some aside and say, "Hey, I think Greta is going to put a love spell on you. You had better watch it! She'll turn you into a toad if you don't go out with her!" She would laugh and the boys would play along and cringe – some more than others.

Eventually the final bell rang, and Greta walked hurriedly toward the exit doors. She wanted nothing but the warm sun to reassure her that she was free of the school and Whitney. At least it is Friday, she thought, a whole weekend without torment. Just then, Whitney's called from the hall, "Hey, Greta! Don't forget to turn your book report in to me first thing Monday morning!" Greta shoved the door open and hurried out, allowing it to close behind her and silence yet another wave of laughter.

Greta was an emotional wreck by the time she finally crashed through the front door of her mom's mobile home. She allowed all the bottled-up angst and hatred to seep out a little at a time, hoping to keep herself under control. She typically waited to get to her room before she completely uncorked the rage of tears.

"What's the matter, Honey?" Greta's mother called to her daughter.

“Nothing!” Greta muttered, trying not to sound shrill. She ran to her room and dove across her bed, burying her face into her pillow. She used it to muffle her cries which almost came out without meaning. She had so much negative energy to release, that she almost forgot what had caused it. She just screamed and sobbed with all the energy she could muster.

She gripped her pillow and wished that her dad was still alive. They used to have a nice house in a nice neighborhood with lots of other kids to play with. She used to have lots of friends. She remembered the day her mom said that he had died. He was stabbed by a man in a parking lot who stole his wallet. She remembered when the man was finally arrested, that he had only made off with fourteen dollars. In the front seat he had a brand new teddy bear for Greta’s collection. But he was never able to deliver it personally.

Greta pulled back from her pillow to look at her teddy bear that still rested on the night stand next to her bed but was distracted by the mess that she had made. Black, wet smudges were smeared across the pillow case from where her mascara had streaked down her face. Now her pillow was an unintentional avant-garde art piece that reflected her emotional state. The image triggered a fear inside her that told her that she was in danger of completely breaking down. One day, perhaps one day soon, she would hit her emotional wall. She feared what she would do when the day comes.

A faint knock on her door startled her. She flipped the stained pillow over and placed it back onto the bed.

“Yeah?” Greta answered in a cracked voice that she tried to instill faux cheeriness with.

The door opened slightly and Greta’s mother poked her head in. “Your Aunt Melina is on her way. I know you like to visit with her when she comes.”

Greta’s spirits rose slightly. She did love her aunt. Melina was out living the good life. She traveled the world for *The World Surrounds Us*, a cultural magazine based in New York. The last that Greta had heard, Melina was in Argentina or Brazil or somewhere similar. She was probably just getting back from spending a month with some indigenous tribe, deep in the wilds of the rainforest.

Often Greta would imagine scenarios of herself on the adventures that she would have if she ever had the opportunity to join her aunt on her trips. The world seemed like such a big place that was so full of excitement and

adventure. Yet, as always, the weight of the harsh reality of her life would always crash down and obliterate her beautiful dreams.

And again, reality intervened.

The vision of her mother's face slowly broke her from her thoughts, sending the last fleeting images of white waterfalls and lush green canopies to fade away into oblivion. She was still standing in the doorway, no doubt waiting for some sort of reply. Greta flashed a brief smile to appease her and wiped her black tears from her face.

"I think she said that she had picked something up for you from one of the tribesmen down there. She said that she thought you'd like it."

Finally Greta was able to smile legitimately. Aunt Melina always brought the greatest gifts. Last year, she brought back a real shrunken head from Peru. Greta looked over to her shelves and the tiny brown wrinkly head stared back at her with its sewn eyes.

She never understood when exactly she had developed her fascination for the macabre. The psychologist said that it was a perfectly normal stage to go through after her father's death. But that had happened over ten years ago and now there is not as much of a fascination for the macabre as there is an obsession. Her room is completely decorated in blacks, charcoal grays and velvety purples. And her Aunt Melina's bizarre gifts added to the strange, dark museum of the Howard home.

Greta went to the bathroom to wash up. Her face was a mess. Black makeup and tears do not mix well. She dabbed her face with a towel and sighed at how pale she looked. Her chalky face housed two sad, puffy eyes which were beginning to fill with tears again. She quickly wiped them and turned away from the image that disgusted her.

She opened the door and she stepped into a wonderful invisible cloud. The enchanting aroma of lasagna summoned her from the tiny hallway. Lasagna was Aunt Melina's favorite. The warm reality of Melina's visit came to the forefront of her mind. A twinge of excitement flickered within Greta as she skipped toward the kitchen.

She wondered what her favorite aunt would bring her this time. Would it be a ceremonial cannibal fork? Jars of fresh mandrake roots? Perhaps a sacred bull femur? Another hand of glory? She had almost entirely forgotten all about Whitney and her terrible day. *Almost*.

Just as Greta passed the front door, there was a knock. Her heart nearly burst with unmitigated excitement.

She flung the door open, revealing a disheveled middle-aged woman who stood at the stoop. Her hair was severely wind-blown and she was nearly out of breath – most likely because of all the bags that she had propped against her hips and hanging from her shoulders.

With a hoarse smoker's voice she said, "Well young lady," she blew a strand of wiry hair from her face, "are you going to gawk at me all evening, or invite me in?"

Greta nearly leapt through the door as she grabbed half of the bags from the lady. She smelled of stale cigarette smoke and musky perfume. Greta imagined that heaven smelled the same way.

"Come on in, Aunt Melina!" Greta chimed as she shuffled up the metal grated steps to the door. "How was your trip?"

"Oh it was awful. I was stuck next to some idiot who talked nonstop about his career in stock trading the entire flight from Brazil to Miami." She grunted and slung her suitcase into the living room. "Then, from Miami to Louisville, there was nothing but turbulence the whole way. I nearly hurled my guts out." She laughed that husky laugh that Greta loved so much. "Oh, and don't think that I don't know why you're so excited to see me." Melina eyed Greta slyly. "...and yes, I brought you a little something. Though I'm sorry it's not as gruesome as that other stuff that I usually bring you." Melina eyed Greta's mother ruefully.

Greta hid her frustration as much as she could muster. Her mother constantly tried to push her into more colorful and happy clothes and room décor. There was little doubt that she had told her Aunt Melina to bring a toned-down gift instead of her usual, more interesting treasures.

Greta clinched her jaw as she flashed a smile for Melina. She hoped that she had successfully shielded her preemptive anger that she had brewing toward her mother. She didn't want to make a nuisance of herself in from of Melina, but she knew that she wouldn't be able to keep herself from screaming as soon as Melina leaves.

"Okay, I won't make you wait." Melina picked up a brown paper package. It was tied with twine that had a card tucked into it.

Greta carefully opened the card and in perfect cursive, it read:

To my favorite niece – my only niece – Greta. May this bring you the happiness that you so justly deserve.

Greta smiled warmly and then untied the twine.

She slid the brown paper off of a plain, white cardboard box. Slightly frustrated with having another obstacle, she refused to just tear into the box's tape-secured panel. The suspense was nearly unbearable.

She cut the thin tape with her fingernail and opened the box flaps. She saw strands of blonde hair. Her fingers trembled with anticipation as she reached into the box and gripped something smooth and cool. It felt a lot like a baby doll. Greta's excitement was nearly completely quelled again as anger toward her mother mounted and balled up inside her chest. It better not be a doll, she silently muttered.

She pulled the object out slowly. Sure enough, it was a baby doll, no worse, it was a marionette. Long, thin, nearly invisible cords connected its head, hands and feet to a wooden cross. Yet, something about it was *off*.

She had an instant feeling of dread upon looking at it. She studied closely it until she slowly figured out what it was. Its blonde, curly locks and vivid blue eyes were similar to Whitney's. From now on when she came home, miserable from a long day of torment, she would be reminded of the very person who was her tormentor – Whitney Cartwright.

"That, my little darlin', is a marionette that I bought in a little corner shop in Brazil. Afterward I had a Munduruku Shaman bless it for me. 'It should bring you great joy and happiness,' he said."

Greta feigned a smile, but she knew that she had not fully masked her disappointment. "Thanks, Aunt Melina. I'll go put it on my shelf."

"I'll come with you. I haven't seen your room in years. Is it still as gloomy as I remember it?" Melina nudged Greta with her elbow playfully.

Greta giggled a bit, unable to resist her aunt's lighthearted disposition. "Yes. In fact it's more so!" She teased back.

"Oh, delightful!" Melina laughed hoarsely before giving way to her slight smoker's cough.

Greta led Melina into her room. She had already cleared a spot on the shelf for the gift. She had hoped that it would be something grizzly and disgusting. Instead, it was a rosy-cheeked marionette that reminded her of a person that she loathed – grizzly and disgusting indeed. She placed it on the shelf and backed away to get a better perspective of it.

The white dress contrasted brightly against the dark wall and shelf. Its blonde locks twirled down its rubber face. Its bright blue eyes stared stoically back at Greta. She couldn't quell the urge to shutter slightly as she thought of a miniature Whitney sitting on her shelf.

“Here.” Melina whispered, “Your mom doesn’t have to know about her accessories that I bought once the plane landed.” She handed another bag over to Greta. It was filled with black thread, a leather dress and various other gothic knick-knacks.

“Thanks, Aunt Melina.” She hugged her aunt, “I would’ve liked it, even without all this stuff.” She lied. She appreciated the gift, but she couldn’t help but to hate the miniature Whitney that stared emptily at her.

“Nonsense! You ugly that thing up. It’s giving me the creeps.” Melina said. Her jewelry lightly clinked and jingled as she gave a feigned shutter.

“Okay, I’ll make her especially ugly for you.” Greta promised with a smile.

***

Greta returned the altered doll to the shelf. She had fulfilled her promise. The doll was as ugly as Greta could imagine.

The lips were sewn with a crude zigzag pattern. Dozens of straight pins were shoved into the doll’s face so that only the black bulb ends showed. She dyed the dolls hair jet-black with shoe polish and dressed her in a shiny black leather corset and matching boots.

She had painted tiny blue-green veins on its rubber flesh around the temples, face and neck. Its skin, which once had a magnificent porcelain sheen, was now ghostly white and sickly. Its cheeks and eyes had the appearance that they had sunken in from the gruesome makeup. Its once tranquil blue eyes were removed and then replaced with eyeballs that had filmy blue-gray irises. Greta took pride in her masterpiece.

“Aunt Melina!” She called, “Come look.”

Melina entered the room a few seconds later and scrunched up her face. “Yeah honey, you sure uglied her up.” She picked the modified marionette up from the shelf. Its haunting glare sent legitimate chills up her spine as if someone had walked over her grave. “So, I take it you like you gift then?”

Greta hugged Melina. A refreshing smell of cigarette smoke and peppermint met her nose. “I love it!”

“Now remember,” Melina carefully placed the marionette back onto the shelf, “I had her blessed by the Shaman of the Munduruku tribe. She’s supposed to bring you great joy and happiness. Perhaps your dreams will

come true soon enough." She ruffled Greta's hair and then looked at her meaningfully, "Maybe things will start looking up for you kiddo."

Greta beamed a wide smile at the doll. "I hope so." But the doll had already made her happy. Albeit temporary, she reminded herself. In a couple days, it would be another Monday - another *school* day. Whitney Cartwright will be there and Greta knew that she'd never be truly happy as long as she was around.

***

Greta dried the last of the dishes and placed them back into their respective cabinets. Her mother and her Aunt Melina were catching up in the living room as they shared a pot of after-dinner coffee.

In a few minutes, Melina would have to leave again. She had only stayed for a couple of days, as she always did when she was able to visit. She had always been a very busy person, never staying too long in one place. Her employer already has a trip to Malawi set up for her next week. After that: Gambia, then Bali, then who knows where.

"Greta, come say goodbye to your aunt." Greta's mother called.

Greta always hated to see her aunt leave. Perhaps it was because of what she represented. She was able to see the world. She was able to fit in wherever she went. Nearly everyone from every culture welcomed her with open arms. They gave her gifts, fed her and opened up their homes to her. She was full of joy and fervor. She was truly happy.

Greta was stuck in a two-bedroom trailer with her mother, which was not a bad life, just a mundane one. At school she was picked on mercilessly and there was, at least, two more years of torture to endure, maybe more if her grades don't come up.

Yes, a life full of adventure and travel teased Greta. It made itself known to her and even dangled itself within touching distance by way of her Aunt Melina, but it made itself absolutely impossible for her to obtain it for herself. There was no wonder why Melina was so intriguing and wonderful in Greta's eyes. Her life was Greta's personal Holy Grail.

Greta hugged Melina and solemnly walked back to her room. The embodiment of her hopes and dreams was loading her suitcases into the back seat of her car.

Greta plopped down onto her bed and glanced at her backpack. She had homework to do, but malaise had already kicked in. She hadn't the energy to start on it. Instead she rolled back and looked at her new marionette. Its filmy eyes glared at her from across the room.

She shuttered a bit and then rolled over so that she would not have to face her own hideous creation. Before long, she was asleep.

***

Whitney Cartwright sat at the roll-top desk in her room. She had just completed her essay on banned books. The assignment was an argument piece on why certain books should or should not be banned from schools.

Her side of the argument came to her easily. She didn't even consider the alternative argument, except to debunk it. Occult books should be immediately banned. She hoped that if they were to go, little hussies like Greta Howard would soon follow. *They should allow student bans too*, she thought with a smug grin. She wished that she had the fortitude to include it in her paper.

She switched off the reading lamp at the desk and carefully placed her homework into her backpack, not wanting to crease the decorative report cover for her paper. She had already eaten and showered and was already wearing her nightclothes and was nearly settled for bed. She just needed to brush her hair first.

She moved over to her expensive mahogany bureau and examined her face in its round mirror. Her complexion was getting worse. *That hussy Greta*, she fumed silently. She's stressing me out so bad that I'm on the verge of a breakout. She huffed and picked up her cell phone. She needed to blow off some steam.

The phone rang several times before a sleepy voice answered, "Hello." It was Gina, Whitney's 'best friend forever,' as they always claimed despite their constant catty spats and mutual secretive backstabbing.

"Hey Gina!" Whitney chirped as she leaned closer to the mirror. She cringed. She was going to need another upper-lip wax soon.

"What's up?" Gina asked slightly less sleepily, yet slightly more annoyed.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just getting ready for bed. What about you?” She flared her nostrils to see if she needed to clean out any bats from the belfry.

“I was already in bed, asleep actually. Did you need something?” Gina’s voice cut through tainted with aggravation. Whitney slowly caught on to Gina’s mood.

“Ugh, never mind!” She hung up the phone and tossed it back onto her bureau. She grabbed her brush and angrily raked it through her wavy blonde hair.

She stopped suddenly when she thought that she saw something in the mirror. It was only a fleeting glimpse of something that she may have only imagined, but she stopped brushing anyway, nearly frozen in terror. It looked almost as if a shadow had passed her window. The mini blinds had briefly darkened and then reverted back to normal, she was almost sure of it.

She slowly slid her robe from her bedpost and wrapped it around her. If some pervert was trying to look in on her, he wasn’t going to get a free show. She lightened her tension by imagining that it was probably Greta. She continued to brush her hair with a muted smirk that actually did very little to lessen the lump of fear in her throat.

Her hair was nearly finished when she saw another shadow flail by her window. Her stomach tightened. Was someone actually looking in on her? She scanned the room by way of the mirror, trying not to look too obvious about it. She slid an old parasol that she had used in a pageant once from the arms of her life-sized teddy bear. It would have to do.

She turned away from the bureau, noticing that the shadow had returned and still remained at her window. She walked slowly around the foot of her bed, her heartbeat intensifying with every step that brought her closer to the window. With a sweaty palm, she squeezed the parasol tighter, ready to strike.

She imagined herself ramming the parasol’s tip into some pervert’s eye. That would show him! Then she came back to reality with a nervous anticipation that layered itself on top of her fear. Would she be able to go through with such an act?

She passed the window and stood with her back against the wall. She wrapped the mini blinds cord around her hand so that one quick jerk would fully expose anyone at the window. The ironic thought of someone ‘fully exposed’ at her window made her cringe. She was nearly nauseous with

fear. Finally she took a deep breath and yanked the cord and leapt in front of the window with the parasol in-hand.

There was nothing in the window except for the reflection of her room and her silhouette, menacingly clinging to a dainty parasol. She sighed with relief and quickly lowered the mini blinds. Standing in front of an exposed window at near-midnight was intimidating. Staring at herself standing inside a void of darkness made the inside of her chest quiver.

She let out a brief shriek that she stifled with her hand when something banged against the window. The nervous nausea returned two-fold. She leaned close to the window and opened two of the mini blinds' slats. A hideous doll's face stared back at her.

Greta! Greta must be responsible. Who else would own such a horrible doll? She flung open the window and stared into the darkness. A waft of fresh cool air billowed into the room in a sharp gust. She listened for retreating footsteps but was met with silence. Angrily, she snatched the marionette off of the shrub that paralleled the bottom of her window.

She tossed the marionette onto the desk chair and clenched her teeth. Oh my God! I am so going to kill her tomorrow. She thinks that I was mean to her before? She doesn't even know!

Whitney was too worked up to sleep. She snatched up her cell phone again and paced the floor. She punched the number two button on her phone. 'Gina' came up on the display and she hit the talk button.

She shot a hateful glare at marionette. It lay crumpled in the chair. It's cold, piercing eyes were fixed on hers. She turned away from it. Something about those eyes made her uneasy. She shivered slightly as the phone finally connected and rang the other line.

"Ugh, come on!" The phone had rung five times and then was directed to voicemail. She slapped her phone shut and then tossed it onto the bureau again. "Gina, this is not a time to make me mad." Whitney grumbled to herself.

She shoved the desk chair causing the marionette to crumple further between the chair and the desk. "I don't want you staring at me all night. God knows *Greta* probably would want to." She sidled back over to her bed, never taking her eyes off the crumpled marionette, and reluctantly lay down for the night.

Once the initial fear dissolved, Whitney continued to fume for what seemed like hours. Eventually she relaxed herself with devious thoughts of

wonderful revenge. Finally she fell asleep.

Whitney did not sleep well that night, however. Those blue-gray eyes had burned into her subconscious and now she was dreaming of them.

She dreamt that she was on a stage with hot overhead lights that nearly blinded her. Her hands and feet were connected to coarse ropes that forced her to dance crudely around the stage. An audience laughed and cheered and threw popcorn and candy at her. She cried for help, but the audience continued to laugh, unconcerned with her pain. She looked up and there they were - those two unflinching, evil eyes stared down at her. The marionette had been controlling her the whole time. Its tiny hands had twisted and swayed the wooden cross and made her dance around awkwardly across the stage. It had made her look like a complete fool in front of everybody. She hated the marionette almost as much as she hated Greta.

Whitney snapped awake. She was sweaty and out of breath. She quickly checked her wrists and sighed. It was so real, yet thankfully, it was only a dream. She dabbed the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. Her alarm clock read: 3:36. What a long night, she thought.

She readjusted the blanket and snuggled her head deeper into her pillow. Then her heart nearly stopped. Something had caught her eye. She raised her head and what she saw caused her arms and legs to feel as if they were lead weights. The marionette was sitting on the end of the bed. It stared at her. A strand of light from the lamppost outside had draped across the marionette's face and highlighted one of those eyes.

Almost paralyzed with fear, she darted her head to the side after several seconds, only barely able to break the hypnotic glare of those evil eyes. She looked for signs that someone may had snuck into her room. "Greta?" she whispered. Only deep fear quelled her hatred toward Greta enough to whisper her name, hopeful that it was only her playing a prank.

Then there was a feint "shhhh..." from the end of the bed.

The marionette had one of its tiny fingers pressed against its sewn lips. The corner of those lips curled upward as the marionette's head tilted to the side as if to size Whitney up.

Whitney pulled out the drawer in her bedside desk. She felt around for something – anything that could be used as a weapon.

The doll slowly rose to its feet. Its movements were fluid and smooth. Not those clunky, awkward ones that a marionette should make. It was

alive. It walked up Whitney's leg, to her torso, and then to her chest before settling down.

Whitney, found something thin and metallic. She quickly determined that it was her nail file. She ripped it from the drawer and jabbed it into the chest of the marionette, hoping that she had ended the nightmare.

She stared, wide-eyed and deep-breathing, as she waited for a reaction. The marionette sat silently for a few moments and then removed the nail file and examined it.

Whitney's mind had almost shut down from terror. These sorts of things don't happen in real life, she convinced herself. She thought that she must be dancing on the thin line of reality and fantasy that lies on the cusp of agitated sleep. She almost giggled at the absurdity of it all. It was a dream, it had to be.

The marionette took its focus away from the file and looked back at the hysterical girl. It covered her mouth with its tiny hand, causing Whitney to laugh.

"Stop it. You're hand won't even fit over my mouth!" She laughed. Whitney's mind had escaped to where it felt most safe. It had curled up in a comfortable niche somewhere in the recesses of her conscious, unable to perceive or process properly.

The marionette raised the nail file high over its head. There was one last glimmer of reflective light before it brought it down into Whitney's throat. Reality came roaring to the forefront of Whitney's mind. It wasn't a dream. It wasn't some strange fever-wrought hallucination. The marionette was real and it had delivered her deathblow and within moments, she would be cold and glassy-eyed.

For a few moments she attempted to scream, but she could only gargle and choke on the blood that rushed to fill the wound. Her last thoughts were of Greta. She wanted another chance for revenge. Oh, how she hated Greta.

***

The school day began like most others. Everyone sleepily shuffled through the entrance doors. Nobody was courteous enough to hold the door open for Greta. It almost slapped her in the forehead as it slammed shut.

As she trudged toward the hallway where her homeroom was located, she wondered what kind of abuse she was going to have to endure today. How many boys would she be accused of putting hexes on, she wondered.

"Oh my God!" Someone screamed from the short hallway in the back of the school. A chorus of screams followed.

Greta followed the screams and joined a crowd that continued to grow larger by the second. Everyone seemed to head toward the auditorium. Bret Samuelson caused a break in the crowd when he came out spouting vomit across the floor. Small packs of girls shook and cried on each others' shoulders. There was something awful in the auditorium.

She passed through a cluster boys in which she overheard one saying 'Did you see her eyes? That was freaky! They were all filmed over and gray!" Another boy answered, "Yeah, she was crying blood too!"

Greta poked her head through the auditorium doorway. A forbidding curiosity forced her to keep moving forward along with a handful of other students despite Principal Jones, who was unsuccessfully attempting to usher all the students away. Not even the President of the United States could immediately deflect a few hundred students away from a sight like Greta was taking in.

Whitney Cartwright was hanging high over the auditorium stage. Only a few months prior, she had performed the role of Blanche in the school play version of "A Streetcar Named Desire." Now she was dangling from the overhead framework by a tangled mess of cables and cords. She wore a black leather corset and matching boots. Various blue-green veins were painted on her arms, legs, chest and face. Her mouth had been sewn shut and her eyes had been replaced. They remained open and trails of bloody tears had streamed down her cheeks. Now they were dried lines of rust that rested on her discolored face. Her false eyes gawked at passersby as they were ushered away from her. They stared a pale blue-gray stare - a truly hideous stare.

***

Greta sat beside her Aunt Melina. She twiddled her fingers and tugged absently at her shirt-tail. She could barely look her in the eye. "Are you sure that you believe me?"

Melina looked down at Greta thoughtfully and tried to ease her worries with a smile, “Yes, I told you that I did.” She was not completely sure, but from the stories that Greta had told her about Whitney, she understood her plight. Everyone has a breaking point. Though it was absolutely wrong of her to commit murder, if she in fact did, Whitney had certainly driven Greta to do it.

“But how else would she have looked exactly like the doll?”

“I can’t answer that, darlin’. I think you ought to just relax and let everything blow over.” Melina diverted her attention to the baggage cart that was being unloaded by two men. She worried for her niece. With her fragile psyche, she needed to be coddled, not questioned. The questions could come later.

Greta tried to settle in the seat. The plane was about to leave for Malawi. Her dreams had come true as promised - she was a real life jet-setter, but at what price? Whitney was dead and Gina had told the police about how Greta and Whitney never got along. Greta was a fugitive and she was still not sure if Melina believed her or not.

She had not achieved her dreams in the manner that she had hoped, but she was on her way to world-wide adventure at her aunt’s side nonetheless. It was an opportunity that she had been waiting for over the past several years and as soon as the plane leaves the ground, she will be a new woman. Yet, she couldn’t help but to think of her mom.

Her mother had sent her over to her aunt Melina’s to protect her. Nobody knew exactly who was responsible for Whitney Cartwright’s death, but there were whispers in the hallways, and not all of them instigated by Gina. The relationship between Whitney and Greta was well known. Most of the student-body had already made up their minds.

When police had arrived to check out the Howard home, it was clear to them that someone had lived in the back bedroom. There were articles of stray clothing lying about. The carpet was covered with irregular balls of lint. A backpack with the initials: G. H. sat alone in the tiny closet.

But Greta’s mother had packed up Greta’s belongings and tearfully sent her along with Melina. She felt that Greta’s only chance of escaping the charges was to avoid them all together. She would have to leave the country until things blew over – whenever or if ever that would be.

Greta wringed her hands nervously as the thrust of the jet pushed her back into her seat. A tear of bittersweet joy formed in the corner of her eye.

Regardless of where her planes go, her future will always be filled with uncertainty. Melina, as reassuringly as she could, placed her hand on Greta's and gave a kind squeeze. Greta returned the warm smile.

Something thudded in the overhead compartment and the door unlatched, startling Greta. Greta's marionette dropped down and hung awkwardly by its cords. It swung back and forth, like a grotesque pendulum, with its blue-gray eyes fixated on Greta's. Its devious, permanent smile chilled her to the bone.

"Oh, so you brought it along?" Melina asked, releasing Greta's hand immediately. She did little to mask her discomfort. To bring the marionette was in poor taste. She would have to attempt to make rid of the abomination at the nearest opportunity, preferably without Greta noticing. She may become defensive.

Greta could not answer her aunt. Her stomach was tight with fear. She knew that she had not packed the marionette. She had thrown it away the very night that Whitney was found dead. Yet there it was. It came along to see her through her journey, with those horrible blue-gray eyes.

Premeditated Combustion

A.J. Huffman

Looking up at the world from a point
both prone and submissive, I wonder
what is left of the aerials. The trees, the birds, the clouds
forming, disbanding, forming again. They hold
my focus for so long I forget I am solid. I start
to dissipate. Dissolve inside my own
consciousness. Arms, legs, body boil. Liquidated,
they follow the lead of the rain, seep
into the parched mouth of a mound. Earthly
sensations shift. Eyes and mind
are all I have left. Everything is red. I am
alerted by something not quite tangible
slowly wrapping itself inside me. Hissing
a lie I have always held
to be a truth: the sky should not be
made of fire.

With Insomnia

A.J. Huffman

binding my mind, I ponder proposed
fates. So many can fit inside a vessel
in the shape of night. I bow
to their talons, sharp as fear. Touch
rings tangible, each stroke ticking. Clock-
like blood dripping from wounds, real
and imagined. I am a self-inflicted
murderer, ill equipped to
survive. I can
only shake in shame, pray for temporary
cover. Granted, a shade
is pulled. I am blinded
by dawn.

To Die Or Not To Die

A.J. Huffman

that is the question the zombie is
denied. A complex thought that may
or may not be echoing through
a disconnected brain. This creature
reacts instinctively. Animal-like
movements drive it forward with only one
base-level motivation: to feed. It takes
life to simulate life, a true expression
of the act of decomposition.

Priceless

A.J. Huffman

Petals weeping scarlet sinew
fall across unfeeling flesh. In portrait:
disaster. He trades
blade for brush, believing
in every stroke (prior and
post). Mortem to immortal.
The tag of every true art's cost
screams. For a soul?

Jack Is Coming

Bruce H. Markuson

"Sam, hello, it's John. I'm really scared. Jack is coming. I need your help old buddy." John said to me over the phone.

"John, it's great to here from you. I haven't seen you since we got back from Afghanistan."

"Sam, I'm really, really scared. Jack in coming. He's coming Sam. He will be here tonight don't you understand he will be here tonight. I'm scared Sam."

"Listen John I'm going to call the police..."

He interrupted me "No! Don't call the police he will only go into hiding. Then he will be angrier then ever. I need help can you call Charley."

"Ok, I'll call Charley."

"Thanks Sam, I knew I could count on you. I have to go." He hung up on me.

Charley also served with us in Afghanistan.

I gave him a call. "Charley, how's it going."

"Sam, great to hear from you."

"Listen, John is having some trouble. He says some guy is after him and..."

Charley interrupted me. "Is this Jack were talking about."

"Yes, have you met him?"

"No, no never met him. John was telling me about that guy. He said when they were kids they always fought a lot. Jack's the one that gave John that big scar across his chest."

"That's the guy. I think John is in trouble. I just spoke to him over the phone. He said that Jack s going over to his place tonight. I think we should call the police."

Charley snapped back. "Forget the police. Johnny saved both our butts in Afghanistan. Tell you what, let's go over there and pound some sense into that guy. He messes with Johnny, he messes with us."

"You got that right. I'll meet you at Johnny's in half an hour."

I grabbed my baseball bat and hopped in the car. One more thing l had to do. Johnny only had one living relative, his sister Janet.

I called her up. "You have reached Janet Thomson. I'm unable to take you call at the moment. Please leave a message at the beep."

"Hi Janet, this is Sam Coleman. We met the other day when we got back from Afghanistan. I served with your brother John. He called me today. He's says that there is a person named Jack who intends to do him harm tonight. I understand they fought as children. I was wondering if you would have any information on this Jack? Please call me back at this number thank you."

I arrived at John's house. It was an old 1920's bungalow with a huge front porch. I grabbed the baseball bat and got out of the car. Charley was standing on the front lawn with two M16 assault rifles slung over his shoulder.

"You really think you're going to need those?" I said to Charley.

Charley pointed to the front door, "Take a look."

Johns combat knife was stuck in the door. Scratched in to the door next to it were the words. "Die you coward. Jack is coming."

Charley continued, "Inside. John's a wreak."

I walked inside the house. There, in the corner, was Johnny curled up and uncontrollably trembling in fear.

"Jack is coming. Jack is coming." He kept mumbling over and over to himself.

"Johnny, it's going to be ok."

Johnny grabbed my baseball bat, held it like a teddy bear and continued mumbling. "Jack is coming. Jack is coming."

I took Charley aside, "This is insane. I have seen Johnny in combat situations. What could possibly scare him like that?"

Charley responded, "I have seen him under heavy fire in Afghanistan as well. Whoever this Jack is, he's got to be pretty bad."

I took an M16 from Charley's shoulder. "Look, I'll take watch on the front porch. You stay inside with Johnny."

"Sounds good." He replied.

I went outside, locked and loaded the M16 and sat in a rocking chair on the front porch.

After ten minutes my phone rang. "Hello."

"Sam this is Janet. Seriously! After all the drugs and intensive psychotherapy, Jack is back."

"Hi Janet what can you tell me about this Jack."

"There is no Jack!" She screamed at me and continued. "Jack is an extremely violent split personality of John's. I thought we were rid of him years ago. Sam you need to get out of there!"

"Thunk, thunk, thunk," Suddenly I heard from the inside. I dropped the phone and shouldered the M16. I kicked the front door open. Charley was on the floor with his skull crushed in. Next to him Johnny was standing with a bloody baseball bat.

"John!" I said to him.

He came towards me and replied, "Johnny's dead."

I fired two rounds.

Vortex

Mathias Jansson

I see dead trees filled with black nest
Crows filling the sky with cold cries
Flying round the lake as insane shadows
My feet break the water mirror
Disturbed waves of visions
Presents perverted sights
An endless hole of darkness
A lake bottomless as hell

The tickling feeling under my feet
A small current stroking my skin
A small water vortex growing stronger
Spinning mesmerizing faster
Faster and faster under me
A strong grip pulls me down under
Deeper and deeper into the dark
Suddenly a shimmering below
Fantastic fishes with sparkling colors
Visit me with friendly smiles
Kisses me with sharp teeth
Voracious piranhas tear the flesh
From my bleeding bones

And above is the surface so still
The crows sleep silent in their nest
When red bubbles of despair
Breaks the surface with a roar

Search Spiders

Mathias Jansson

All night they have been hunting the web
Fetching suspect files from the net's domain
Images of horror, corpses and death
Crawling in the periphery of morality
At the bottom of human thoughts
Visits the shadows of Dark net
Exchanged encrypted information
With anonymous around the world
Now they are sitting and waiting
I hear their legs clicking in my keyboard
Their shadows crawling over my screen
Their eyes watching me from the webcam
Weaving their web tighter around my mind
As I feed their queen with my dirty deeds

The Trees

Lizz-Ayn Shaarawi

Max doubled over, his head between his knees. His heart pounded and he thought he might hyperventilate. "Come on, Max," said Piper. "The first step is the hardest." Max glared at her but knew she was right. It was his idea after all.

"Just one Xanax," he pleaded.

"No."

"How about a klonopin? Please?" His voice got that annoying pitch to it he hated. He couldn't help it. Just the thought of them made him break into a cold sweat.

The trees.

He didn't know if it was a childhood trauma or a perhaps he saw The Wizard of Oz at too young an age but trees scared the hell out of him. He had a hard time telling anyone. A fear of spiders, people understood. Heights? No problem. But trees? If they didn't ridicule him, they treated him like an idiot.

"Let's go, Max," Piper whispered near his ear.

He could do this. He could take a simple walk in the woods.

A couple of hikers, a man and a woman, headed past them. The man readjusted a bright red backpack. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Fine," Piper called back. "Just a bout of dendrophobia." The hiker nodded, though the look on his face made it obvious he had no idea what she was talking about. It was one of the many reasons Max loved her. She knew that using large words in an authoritative voice was usually all it took to shut people up.

Piper leaned closer to Max. He could feel her warm breath tickle the hairs on his neck. "Come on, Max. For me."

He'd do anything for her. She was the most incredible woman he'd ever met. She was smart and beautiful, and for whatever reason she liked him. Women like her never liked guys like him. He would do anything to keep her. If she wanted him to crawl over hot coals, he would. If she wanted him to handle live rattle snakes, he would. If she wanted him to gouge his own eyes out, he would.

He'd even go for a walk in the woods.

Piper held out her hand and he took it. The trees seemed to loom ahead and he gave an involuntary shudder.

As they made their way to the tree line, Piper spotted a candy bar wrapper. Her lip curled in distaste as she snatched it from the ground. "People are so rude. The world is not their trash can."

Max kept his eyes riveted to the forest. "Uh huh."

Piper shoved the wrapper into her pocket. "I think I saw a trash can at the parking lot."

"What?"

"A trash can."

Max stared at her blankly. She ran her hand over his cheek. "Never mind, it's nothing. Don't worry about it." She took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. " Let's go." Leading the way, she pulled him towards the towering forest.

At the trail head he hesitated. Piper smiled back at him, giving him a boost of confidence. "First step, Max."

Trees are good. They give us oxygen. Some grow fruit. I like fruit. Paper, tissue, furniture, all prove that wood is important. Animals live in trees. I like animals. Max kept the running commentary going through his mind as he neared the first tree.

The leaves rustled. Max shivered. The branches swayed. Max broke into a cold sweat. He pulled his arms close to his body to avoid accidentally touching any part of the tree.

Despite the crushing feeling in his chest, Max made it past the first tree. He made it past the second and the third. Nothing happened. No bad thing occurred. He felt the knot in his stomach loosen. He glanced over at Piper. She squeezed his hand again.

Max continued to avoid touching low hanging branches or small twigs that jutted out from the tree trunks but, in the pleasant afternoon with Piper by his side, the walk became almost comfortable.

"Okay, let's hit the first marker and then we'll turn around," Piper said.

"Sounds good." Max couldn't believe he had been so frightened. Beside him, Piper had stopped. It took him a moment to realize that she was staring into the greenery.

"What's that?" Piper squinted into the dense foliage in front of them. A bright red object drew her attention. As she reached for it, Max's guts

clenched.

"Don't," Max pleaded.

Brows furrowed, Piper replied a bit more testy than she meant to. "It's just a scrap of fabric. People should be more careful about littering." Her fingertips brushed it. Max jerked her hand back.

"Don't touch it."

"Max. Stop it." She rested her hand on a tree trunk and leaned in.

"Just leave it!"

Piper whirled around. "Calm down! I just want to throw it away."

The lowest tree branch drifted down towards Piper's shoulder. Max spotted a flash of pale skin near the red fabric.

"Piper, I think that's one of the hikers."

Piper leaned in again. "What hikers?"

"The ones that asked if I was okay."

The branch drifted lower.

"I think I see an arm. Let's go. We should find a park ranger or something."

Piper strained to grab the fabric. "I've almost got it."

Leaves brushed against her shoulder. She absentmindedly swiped them off. Max backed away. The branch rested on her back and made Piper wriggle. "Quit it, Max."

Another branch drooped and crossed over the first. "Cut it out!"

Max stared in horror as the tree bowed down and its branches engulfed Piper.

"Help me, Max!" The leaves rustled louder and louder. Eventually, they drown out Piper's screams.

Max turned and bolted. A flurry of branches undulated like waves on either side of the trail. Branches whipped out at his arms. Roots snaked across the trail and tried to snag his legs. Max leapt and dodged. He could see the trail head in the distance.

As he broke through the tree line, Max collapsed in a quivering heap. He scanned the area. The parking lot stood near empty, only Piper's car and one other remained.

Max stood on shaky legs. The spare key was in a magnetized box under the passenger wheel well. It would only take a minute to grab it and go. He wobbled toward the parking area. Shadows grew long around him. Whimpering, he increased his gait even as a loud swish filled the air. The

large fir bent down and wrapped a prickly bough around Max's waist. He managed one screech before the tree hauled him back into the cool darkness of the forest.

Hound

D.L. Turpin

Stepping out in the cold air, he slid on leather gloves. He absolute abhorred the cold. A scarf was added to help keep out the chill; autumn could be fickle, and temperatures changes uncomfortable. His cane stood against the stoop, black wood topped by a silver ball. Absently a hand grasped it: he was ready to be off upon his contract. The walking cane briskly clicked on the pavement.

Smoothing his mustache and goatee, they were perfectly kept, the gesture automatic. Act of its upkeep was the business of the last two hours. Immaculate precision, obsessive compulsive attention to detail, and patience was an asset to his particular proclivities. Lithely, the hand passed to the silver pocket watch, heavy chain draped across a slim chest. Staring at the time piece—wound at the same time every day—it was time.

The silver time piece snapped closed with a slight click, hand absently replacing it. He looked down the street: night fall had come throwing all into darkness. The night was the coldest of the year, his breath hung in the air. Street lamps cast dingy orange light, islands of illumination amidst stygian night. A brute stood at the phone booth, his intended destination.

The big man hunched over clutching the receiver, anger cramped apish features. The brute scowled angrily at whoever was at the other end. Directionless hate of the world, baseless nature of it bewildered him, unable to understand why he was anger. Blood darkened his jeans and leather jacket, evidence of an earlier altercation. The man, engrossed in a deep rage, was unaware of the well-dressed man.

"Woman, when I get home, you are going to get more act-right." The promise was growled through stained teeth.

A quick double tap interrupted his aimless fury; however, it quickly latched upon strangers. The well-dressed man stood patiently looking at him, and the fearless cheerful gaze was sickening. Upper class usually stayed clear of men like him, power and money did not matter to such brutes. Eyes flickering away momentarily, the gentleman straightened the vermillion tie, and cleared his throat to punctuate the need to converse. Even this act of civility angered him.

“Excuse me,” he could not wait any longer, “I have a *call* that cannot wait.” His mind focused on things to unfold, and didn’t really register the man, or the mounting irrational fury upon the pitiless features. Things promised to get interesting; the world was very thought-provoking, if you knew where to look.

Eyeing the Gentleman, he spit, “I am going to finish this call. Then I will shove that stick up the back of your *expensive* suit.” The brute sneered at the obviously expensive apparel.

The well-dressed man looked at the cane, the look considering. Crass words were annoying, stupid rage more so. WHY did interaction almost always degenerate into bluster, puffed chests, and bravado? Fools are best left to their foolishness, he told himself. The thought; however, brought a smile to his face.

“Mr. Grubb, I am afraid that this can’t wait.” He finally retorted, seeing a willingness to inflict pain.

For a moment, he froze, feeling bewilderment break through the anger. How did he know my name? The question was quickly forgotten. A delicate hand came up dexterously plucking the phone away, hand still held to one ear. A complete rage burrowed in, he laughed a little, and a pounding began to permeate all thought; hammering a prelude to brutality. Some men didn’t realize the danger they were in.

“I am going to kick your,” Grubb was suddenly cut off by a well-manicured hand.

“Like how you hit our girlfriend. But,” a bored smile came across his face, “what else can you expect? I mean, your *father* did the same to your *mother*.”

In the gentleman’s eyes, he saw his old man—mirror image of Grubb now, only a little older. His fist was raised towards his mother, and God, how many times had he seen it. How many times had mother and son pled or given remonstrations for mercy? The Brute couldn’t even recall. Image acted upon him like a slap, face reddening, tears rising, which threatened to choke him. Recoiling, he felt shame, hurt, and fear.

The amalgamation on his face was soon replaced, familiar rage returned. Grubb’s fist drew back; scars marred them from numerous fights, the knuckles turned red from the strain. Brute and Gentleman’s eyes locked together, the anger departed as if drained. Inside of the well-dressed man’s gaze there was a swirling in the depths. The maelstrom grew into an image.

In the depthless darkness, a desert stretched out across the horizon. Boulders, blasted trees, and bones littered the bloody landscape. Shadows cast from them were too dark, creatures moved inside of them. They took refuge from the sky, one's face thrust past the shelter of shadow. Emaciated face looked like Grubb's father, stupid hate still cramping features. This is Hell, something whispered.

Thunder came from above pulling his gaze away. The ebony clouds boiled covering the entire sky, edge of a storm above promised to be Apocalyptic. A man dressed like the Gentleman stood before Grubb. The storm seemed centered around him; clouds, lightning, and thunder acted in response to every little tick, breathe, or bat of an eye.

This is what lies beneath the man's facade, Grubb thought. Eyes, which were black orbs, regarded him still swirling. White teeth exposed in a smile were a wolf's bloody grin. Slowly the well-dressed man approached, their gazes locked together. He could not run, somehow trapped inside of himself, terror growing with every measured step. In the depths of the Gentleman's maelstrom every idea, promise, or concept of anguish was guaranteed.

The Gentleman watched Grubb stand frozen on the street, hand still balled into a huge fist. A puddle which spread from him, urine steamed in the incredible cold. His delicate one touched the Brute's greasy hair. Quickly drawing a swirl pattern, he withdrew, smiling again very pleased.

"You must excuse me Mr. Grubb, business calls. I hope you understand." He spoke casting the words with a slight titter.

Stepping up to the phone booth, the cane was set down. Black leather gloves grasped the handset, gingerly; idea of people's filth was repellent. Saying nothing—cringing inwardly at the rudeness—he hung the phone back upon the receiver. She would be better off, and he did have time to mince words.

Picking it back up, the earpiece was tentatively held to one ear. The Gentleman battled through the disgust, casting away thoughts of people coughing on the receiver. Cringing, he waited, the phone began to ring. There was no need to dial; he had to only concentrate upon the intended recipient.

"Who is this?" A male's voice answered, confused, but clearly expectant.

"It is Mr. Starr," his smile returning, "and it is time." He could feel the man's belief finally, which was extremely important. Contracts could not be moved upon, till belief was established. That was the rule, set by God and the Devil; breaking the rules brought down all sort of nasty consequences.

"What do you want?" The question asked as a sweat broke out, and had been queried before with no answer. He had thought this, at first, merely delusion brought on by too much work. The secrets this Mr. Starr revealed both scared and exhilarated; although, they always had a hint of laughter and threat.

"Well, you Mr. Bryant, I want you, of course." Starr spoke as if this should have been self-evident. "All things come to those who wait. I have been patient." Mirth and menace crept into his voice, and a species of cruel joy.

"Try and get me," he growled, cold sweat breaking out all over his toned body. The fear betrayed him; threat turned into a child's flippancy.

"Please Joshua, call me Charles. From this point on, I think *we* should be on a first name basis." The Gentleman was on the verge of a titter, but managed to control his delight.

There was no response to this but only silence, both listened intently. Joshua's nerve breaking, the phone was slammed down hard. Stretching back in the bed, hands racked through blonde bouncy curls. Was he going mad? Blue eyes searched the dark above as if an answer was there. Twice, he had seen a male figure in it. Part of him expected to see it there.

Sleep took him, napping briefly without dreams, thankfully, and he soon awoke rubbing his eyes. He had a girl Evangeline coming, looking at the clock seeing an hour remained. The woman's naiveté was only equaled by her Supermodel body and brain. Pleasure ensured later was not hampered by the night, which he assured himself it had only been another unsettling dream. Besides, the bodyguards were at every entrance he thought like a prayer. He was just being paranoid.

Charles replaced the phone once more, lights along the street flickering. Walking away, he left Grubb studying a drop of Hell. He removed a deck of cards: free hand shuffled them distantly. A nice stroll was in order, and he had a little time to kill.

Grubb blinked confused, still holding a fist up, image breaking away as did his recollection of it. He felt jittery, and put a shaky hand to a wet

brow. Images hung on the edge of perception; another world was visible just beyond shadow. His gaze was averted before any could congeal. Whatever they were, he did not want to see them.

The watch fell from his wrist, cut by an invisible force, which felt like a slight icy touch. Cuff of the leather jacket followed sliding easily off. All of his clothes unfurled about him, a whirlwind of razors unclothing him, yet none so much as grazed flesh. The sense of sickness deepened.

Grubb's head began to split and pound, the sensation like great devils striking an equally grand bell; although, this was soon replace by an itch. Tentatively, he touched what ran down his face. What is this? He looked at the dark garnet on scarred hands. Skin came off him in a spiral ribbon; the tornado of razors had finally found flesh. Soon naked of skin, the bottoms of his feet felt sticky. Stumbling down the street, he felt cold, but the same question repeated. *What is this?*

Charles sauntered up the street, just a gentleman on a leisurely jaunt. Breathing deep, he exhaled loving freedom, which had taken years to attain once more. Most had no concept of it, and believed it was given by others, God, or a Government. He had no gods nor masters; service turned quickly into servitude, and he chaffed under such constraints. Taking contracts from all sides, of course, only when it suited him.

Once he had been a Hellhound, an enforcer for Hell, which was just a well-heeled dog. Fetch, find, or kill was the usual command, and like any smart dog, he obeyed. Charles's fate had been well earned, and without regret. In life he had been a gambler, a great one, his path inexorably led him here. Existence was chance, a cacophony of variables which were innumerable. There was no point in lamenting; only enjoying that which could be savored when it could be.

Now he was just a Hound, who chased rabbits for little rewards. The words pleased him for he did like a good hunt, another little pleasure. Payment was very important to him, nonetheless, the currency varied amongst the clients. No longer did he take souls—they whined ceaselessly—but money or trinkets were his preferences. Almost all of it was gambled away, but some was spent on very expensive suits, or stored to be used later.

Idea of new suits always made him smile, the cards turning in his hand. The King of Hearts danced across boney knuckles, and disappeared back into the deck. Three Kings followed, each flipping before rejoining

the others. This sleight of hands was beautiful: some people would stop thinking him a street magician; however, a glance into his dark eyes turned them away. Prestidigitation was more interesting than the real magic. It took real skill.

Through the streets the Hound walked, half in the world, and seeing they unseen. If people could only see what he did, then they would know the vileness of truth. The World of Flesh was just lies, betrayal, and death covered in blood, which threaten to drown all in the mindlessness of its unremarkable banality. This did not disturb him in the least, in fact, it was splendid and hilarious.

The World of Spirit revealed what lay underneath all the appealing words and pretty faces. An avaricious business man, well dressed, well mannered, what money hid was exposed there. Charles had seen eyes bulged in greed, desire for more never to be sated.

People had grand ideas, ambitions, ends, which he scoffed at openly, even in life as foolishness. The real hilarity of this was it never ended, never. In Hell *they* plotted using threats, guile, or lies. In Heaven *they* were fawningly servile, completing tasks, or taking credit for them. Honestly, he could not figure out which was worse. Denizens of either fought to get to the top. Once there, all didn't even get to enjoy the view. Existence became maintaining position, endless Chess matches, which one day each lost.

Charles liked games, in fact, he loved them; however, some were just tiresome and trite. He preferred cards and the hunts, they made sense to him—they did not take decades to see into fruition. The newest little rabbit he pursued for nearly six years. Joshua just got under his skin; the arrogance of the man much like an angel or devil. The gambler thought him both, a repulsive mixture of two warring factions.

Fumbling the cards, he signed breathe hanging in the air like a small cloud. Obsessively, he opened the silver pocket watch again. The jaunt across the night had nearly made him late. Punctuality was very important to him. Clicking the time piece closed, vaguely it was replaced. He fished a key out needing to expedite his walk.

Looking briefly around, he saw an old shop, which was closed like a lot of local businesses. Formerly a hole in the wall liquor store, it did not host even an empty cola bottle. He slid the key in its lock, twisting, door opening but not to the interior. Pushing lightly he stepped in closing the

distance to the rabbit. Thrill of the hunt filled him, and each was a gamble. The door closed behind him, sound of the lock reengaging was nearly silent.

A guard stood by the front gates, shuffling a little trying to stay warm. The job had turned out to be easy, just another paranoid rich man—some people imagine threats everywhere. They rotated every hour, which broke the monotony; however, the only person he had seen tonight was Evangeline. She was beautiful like the others, but there was so many. They were always new, yet the same: Joshua had a certain type. Shuffling again, he tried to stay warm, and thoughts of the parade of women broke the boredom.

Across the street, a door opened, a man emerging, and stepped out onto the grass. Nothing was across in the open field, except an old broken down truck which he had emerged from. Blinking, he tried to dispel this phantom. The well-dressed man remained a reality, and he tried shaking his head in negation. Eyes moving past the gentleman, he saw something even odder. The door to the truck's interior opened onto a street, street lights' orange illumination peeking through. Strange view was cut off as the door slammed abruptly shut.

Charles strolled up to the guard, the man's hand coming up automatically. "Sir, you cannot come in," he spoke in a polite, but authoritative voice. He hated it, feeling too much like an automaton.

"He is expecting me," he replied confidently. "Joshua Bryant hired *you* to keep *me* out, Mr. Bowyer." An easy smile played across his lips, and dark eyes locked onto the guard. There was nothing menacing about the well-dressed man except the eyes. They began to swirl.

"How," the guard asked automatically. He felt panic, the reason escaping him, but the sense of danger did not. Thought was cast aside, hand went to the pistol. They had been told to expect someone, but he had thought it would be a disgruntle husband, not a well groomed gentleman.

"That is not necessary." The cane came up quickly resting on Bowyer's wrist. The smile did not hold a hint of fear: the threat in the gaze however was palpable. "Surely we can converse in a civil manner." Charles added staring into the other's eyes.

The guard stared into swirling eyes that became a maelstrom. Part of Bowyer thought the man a fool, being so cavalier. Reflexes—honed in the Army—made the hand move, and he was a crack shot. Amazingly

however, he relaxed, the threat of death making instincts scream to kill, but still he stayed his hand. "What do you want?" He implored feeling sick.

"A game, wager, just a simple bet," a laugh played through the words. "Call it whatever will ease you."

"Okay," He felt mesmerized, bewildered, and had a bizarre impulse to laugh. Almost giggling, "What is the game?"

"Oh, you just have to guess how many Jacks will be revealed."

"I don't understand."

"No need," Charles replied with a small titter, idea of an explanation ridiculous.

The Gambler shuffled the deck in a beautiful display of skill, but was almost lost in his sheer speed. They were split, shuffled, and flew between hands as if birds migrating between roosts. Cards flipped, moved, and danced in delicate fingers. With each moment, they became more alive, more mesmerizing. Bowyer's eyes flickered back and forth, eyes glowing heavy, sleepy. He grew disoriented muttering, "Three."

Suddenly the Hound's delicate hands came together. Flutter of cards was like a flock of birds, but suddenly stopped; they were a deck once more. Clap of them coming together like a gunshot, one that had killed all in one death stroke. Bowyer observed this shaking, cold, but still sweating. Loud bang so much like a gun, he jumped a little.

Cutting the deck briskly, a Jack popped out spinning to the ground, it fell slowly. Charles didn't look down, eyes studying the other's, but cut again just as efficiently. Another landed beside the first, neatly positioned, both looking set down by a precise hand. A third joined exactly like the others. The guard's eyes darted back and forth, and he felt scared, *game* was nerve wracking. Unforeseen outcome had an equally unknown wager like war—he had seen men torn apart, images still haunting him.

A King of Hearts landed beside the three Jacks. Bowyer loosened his tie, relieved, almost vomiting. "What did I win?" He asked feeling stupid, afraid to ask, but equally terrified not to inquire.

Suddenly the cards flew striking the guard's face. The fluttering sounded like a thousand flocks in migration, sound ramped up to a deafening roar. Bowyer stepped back, growing faint, the assault on senses made the world distant. Charles deftly snatched the Joker card, and stuck it to the man's forehead.

The guard fell over, gate opening behind him, and Charles stepped over mindful to scuff expensive shoes on the fellow. So much for the *help,* he thought, a smile playing across his lips. He could sense others were around; however, they would have to be dealt with as well. It didn't matter; men, guns, cameras, and alarms would not win the day.

Joshua had already gotten Evangeline to the bedroom—he never had trouble seducing. She had done enough drugs to pay for a new car, but it was well worth the price. Sauntering into the room, he had already stripped down. He was toned, and was well aware of how much his visage was appreciated. The two glasses of wine were in his hands.

Intercom buzzed on beside him, a long pause, "Joshua, I have arrived."

Turning fast, wine sloshed out, he stared for a moment. The hum from the speaker was like an insect, buzzing of flies on a putrid corpse. Joshua looked at the grill, things squirmed underneath. Setting down the glasses, he leaned towards the speaker, undulation beneath the grill was repulsive. He pressed the talk button licking dry lips. "Who is this?"

"Charles," the voice buzzed out.

Joshua had the master control to the intercom, light indicating where the other used the system. "Everyone go to the front gate, and send out the dogs."

"Oh, that is unfortunate," Charles' response was full of laughter.

Sound of dogs approaching was loud, the beasts ran hard barking. Running for the intruder, mouths dripped foam, they were crazy with bloodlust. Expensive training had made them killers, who loved to rend. Charles waited for them just inside the gate. They saw him, fervor of the hunt renewed.

The pack pounced, black fur rippled with well-toned muscles. White fangs were darkened with blood. They circled, biting, barking, and ripping flesh in quick little snaps. Guts were quick strewn across the grass, a serial killer's painting of viscera, entrails, and blood. The crazed animal fought over the scraps.

The guards arrived too late, giving the command quick to heel, and the pack stopped the frenzy. Snarling, the well trained animals backed up. Drawing near, the body almost beyond recognition; however, upon closer scrutiny they saw it was Bowyer. A Joker card was stuck to his forehead, the man's blood was splattered across it.

Charles watched the man get torn apart. Bowyer's fellow guards gave the heel command; they barely had control of the pack. Raising a hand, they came to the Gambler knowing a true master. He had a great affinity for dogs, understood them intimately, kinship was born from years of being one for the Devil.

He watched them finally realize they had murdered one of their own, the Hound rolling his eyes at the incompetence. Raising a hand, the pack fell back. "GENTLEMEN," Charles called hailing them, hand still raised. Snapping his fingers, the sound was like a branch snapping.

The guard dogs attacked, trained to be merciless to any not their master. Still bloody teeth sank into arms, legs, throats, and groins. Charles watched the men scream, and again he absently checked the silver pocket watched. The pack did exactly what they were trained to do, their kills efficient but bloody. Thankfully the screams ended quickly, he had things to do. The cries of anguish got tiresome.

Charles walked up to the house: he left the animals to their bloody toys. Taking a deep breath, he smiled. The air had grown colder, breathe came out thick as congealed blood. Casually walking, he whistled looking about. Lights across the property went out, and soon only the moon lit the grounds with its silver light.

Joshua stood by the intercom, waiting, Evangeline had passed out. He stood perfectly still; sound of dogs barking was reassuring. They sounded frenzied, before falling briefly silent, then down right crazy. He should have felt better. He did not.

Finally the intercom buzzed, but again a pause came—he made a mental note to get it changed.

"Joshua," Charles's voice crackled, "I like your dogs; however, the guards are a little under par."

"I got a gun." The threat sounded whiny in his ears.

"Whatever makes you more comfortable," the Gambler's laughter was purposely not veiled.

"*YOU* have no idea who you're messing with." Joshua bit off the words, he knew head games.

"Oh Joshua, I am quite sure *who* I am *messing* with."

"You can't get into the house," the words spoken more to himself, almost hopeful, but quickly fell into a plea.

Charles only laughed in response, letting go of the talk button, approaching the front door smiling. It had an electronic and mechanical lock, which only Joshua had the key to. The rabbit's paranoia had progressed to the edge of delusional. Funny, men and women thought they could deny him.

Leather gloved hand extended, and both locks popped open. He looked forward to this contract being completed; satisfaction was rare, but thoroughly savored. Some people's narcissism knew no bounds. Charles believed all women should be treated with the utmost gentility. He intended to correct Joshua.

The front door opened soundlessly, Joshua grabbed his revolver. Charles looked about the foyer curious as to how the man lived. There were a lot of expensive replicas, which he found a little tacky. Upper class of this age was just crass; everything was surface, but no content. Real furniture should be crafted by hand, artistic rendering of function. A man's decoration said a lot about them, he had always felt.

Boom of the revolver silenced all thoughts of décor. A wisp of smoke curled up from Joshua's revolver, barrel looked bigger than him. Black blood dripped down from a hole in Charles's vest, the insult to its fabric was unforgivable. His eyes went down studying the affront.

"MY SUIT," the Hound said to no one, eyes turning black in rage. Anger always soured his mood, which had been good till now. "You shouldn't mess with a man's suit." He spoke dogmatically, the point, he felt had to be made. His whole aspect darkening, shadows gathered to him. The suit was handmade, and cost well over thirty thousand. Darkness spread out from the Gambler, anger infecting the world.

Black spread across the floor, ceiling, and walls, paint spread by an invisible artist. Inside of the Stygian shadows, another world was visible; picture rendered by a desolate soul. A bloody desert stretched out, and went for far as the eye could see. Midnight dark clouds above roiled with a cataclysmic storm. Boulders were the only shelter, and shadows cast were darker for the firmament above. Creatures hid in these Havens. Joshua couldn't imagine taking refuge there, in such blackness.

Joshua looked, crushed under the surreal Hellish awe of the vision. Charles stood amongst the desolate landscape, at home. However, others soon revealed themselves to him. Emaciated women, skinned alive, dripping blood, crawled tentatively out. The Gambler's harem wore masks,

human leather overly stretched. Staring, Joshua saw they wore the skin of his past lovers, a gruesome parody of beauty immortalized. Quickly their numbers grew; there had been lots of women.

One leaped from behind a nearby rock, the shadow it burst from was like a dead birth canal. The human leather mask was stretched back in a crazed smile. Black hair stuck to the bloody body, movement pulled them free to throw droplets of blood. Bizarrely, the mask had make-up; an insane attempt at beauty beyond grasp. The woman-slasher carried a tool used to flay. Sight of the deliberately dull weapon broke his paralysis.

Evangeline, he recalled suddenly, turning away he meant to reach her before them. Darkness spread through the house, each moment it gained momentum. Joshua ran hard; he could feel himself running out of time. One patch of darkness tried to cut him off, and he jumped barely clearing it. He knew touching the black substance meant capture or death.

Joshua finally burst into the bedroom, Evangeline rousing. "GET UP," he commanded walking quickly over.

"What?" She enquired too fuzzy to think.

"We are in danger."

"I don't understand," she replied rubbing eyes.

Joshua grabbed her thin arm pulling her out of bed. Holding the gun, he towed her, feeble protests were ignored. Looking quickly back at the door, darkness had finally come spreading. For a moment he let go.

Free hand pulled a lever, which was disguised as a book, and opened the well-fortified panic room. The bookshelf moved silently. Joshua crammed her in, hitting another lever it closed behind them.

For a moment they were in complete dark, the smell of the small room like old meat. Joshua hastily flipped the switch; his mind quickly went back to the pursuing darkness. Lights in the panic room flickered on.

The room was barely big enough for the operating table and tanning rack. The disarray was in stark contrast to the compulsive neatness of the house itself, the room revealing much about the owner; dark and blood lain at the center of both man and home. Old blood stains were everywhere, he never bothered to clean them. A tray full of tool was the only things in neat order. Rusty, they had never been cleaned, and blood had rusted them badly. They were all designed to peel off skin.

Evangeline looked around, backing up, entrance had already closed. Leather masks hung in neat rows, another bizarre spot of compulsiveness.

They were made from beautiful women. Something tickled her cheek, turning she could barely pulled her horrified gaze away. Pretty, flawless skin had been immortalized in the mask, it hair prickling her. Empty eye sockets regarded her stupidly. Her scream was cut off by two quick hits.

She awoke on the gurney, light above flickering, but still blinding. Evangeline couldn't move, and the fog of her mind kept recollection at bay. Joshua's angelic face loomed above, a beatific saint in beautiful thought. He held a knife. His face abruptly contorted becoming voracious, avid to sate inner demonic lusts for pain, blood, and unspoiled beauty. She screamed, blubbering out a plea or prayer.

Joshua wished he had time; he always liked to explain the purpose of this ritual. His mother had explained it so well. It was important to immortalize beauty before time could take it away. She had killed herself, but not before making a request, and he had kept the promise; only a boy, he still knew how to use a knife. He still had his mother's mask. Sometimes he would wear it to feel close to her, when he was sad or hurt.

"Finally, Joshua, I have found you…sorry to interrupt." Charles stepped through the darkness which consumed the walls.

Raising the knife again, he looked at the Gambler's eyes. Their eyes locked together, arm lowering back down, knife dropping. Charles smiled nodding in appreciation.

"What do you want? WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"! Joshua screamed crying as a hand grasped his mother's leather mask. He needed its comfort.

"You, I want you." The Gambler's smile widened, hand removed an odd little key. Looking around the room, he added, "I had to find you, make sure, but you had to believe in me first; I have something that belongs to you."

"Oh," Joshua licked his lips confused. His eyes went to the odd silver key.

Charles placed it in his sweaty palm careful not to touch it, even in gloves. Along the key's shaft hooks adorned it, each ended in vicious little barbs. This won't open anything Joshua thought disappointed. His gaze was pulled towards the back of the book shelf, ghost hooks dug into them painfully insistent. A door knob had appeared, its key hole shaped like the bizarre silver key.

Joshua slid it in as if in a dream, the sudden thrust oddly sensual, and tumblers moved in well-oiled precision. Dreamily, the locked opened

without the slightest protest, brisk click barely audible. The bookshelf swung open instead of sliding. A room like this one lay beyond, but had masculine masks somehow familiar to him. A woman stood on the other side, his gaze immediately going to her. Slender frame was covered in a conservative suit, much like his mother's favorite. Turning, he saw she wore a white mask; an empty canvass which anything could be created upon. Stepping inside, he forgot about Evangeline and Charles.

"Not so much as a goodbye," the Gambler sighed. The room led to the lair of another devil, which had her predilections and victims. Charles could not imagine having to be spend eternity in erotic repose with one's mother; idea of Hell specific to Joshua. He would be torn apart forever while his mother leers, disgusting, yet every creature earns its place in the here-after. Sex, torture, and anguish, the old Pit trifecta for the damned had claimed another. Athalia had mastered the art of torment, and she had agreed to pay Starr handsomely. The Gambler did not enjoy the idea, but the hunt was over, rabbit caught, and the payment would be in his bank account.

"HELP ME!" Evangeline cried sobbing.

"Please madam, don't cry; I absolutely deplore women's tears." She immediately stopped, and he smiled. "Do you like card tricks?"

She shrugged, confused and still a little scared, but still watched him begin to shuffle. Darkness spread across the room, and the entire property. Evangeline didn't notice this, but only watched the hypnotic cards, which fluttered beautifully like birds. She loved birds. They danced beautifully, obscuring her vision she considered snatching at one, the thought naughty. Soothing sound made her feel heavy, vision transitioning neatly into dream.

Evangeline awoke upon Joshua's lavish bed, alone. He must have left, she thought a little disappointed. Groggy, too good of a time from last night, she had lost it all in a fog. She had the craziest dream about birds that had turned into a nightmare. A red desolate desert of a blood red lay under a black roiling sky. The worst was the boulders; shadow cast by them seemed to watch her and hate. Sitting up, she shook off the dream, and a card fell from her chest, a Joker.

The Echo of a Lost Virtue

M. J. McClymont

'Remorse is the echo of a lost virtue.'
-Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton

Derek Herd stubbed his shrinking cigarette out on the dashboard, grinding the butt into the hard plastic with the tip of his finger then absent-mindedly lit another. He had been hitting the drink again. He had been drinking quite a bit recently, but tonight, even he knew he had drunk far too much.

His vision blurred as he peered into the yellow curtain of impenetrable fog pushing against the windscreen of the BMW and he rubbed his bleary eyes, blinking myopically. Once or twice his head drooped as he began drift off and the BMW mounted the apex of the steep camber, veering over to the other side of the road before Derek's head snapped up. The second time this happened, a lit cigarette dropped from his mouth onto this lap, eating through the material of his suit trousers and burning his crotch. He yelled as the searing pain kicked in and patted his crotch wildly in an attempt to extinguish the glowing tip.

He had promised a lot of things lately, none of which he had even attempted to coax into fruition. In particular, he had promised Molly that he would be home for seven-thirty pm at the latest, the glowing LCD on the dash read just after half past eleven. He had also promised her that he would be sober when he arrived; he had blown that one, grand style.

Derek rolled down the window a fraction, allowing a sharp blast of air to enter the cozy interior, and prodded the power button on the car stereo. The deep, melodic tones of Johnny Cash's 'A Boy Named Sue' filled the air.

He removed a small hip-flask from the glove compartment and took a long nip, relishing the heat as the amber liquid coursed a fiery path down his gullet. In moments, the feeling of dread began to ebb away and the blissful drunken state he had occupied a few short hours ago began to take over once more. Molly would be furious with him. He could just see her in his mind's eye now, sitting in darkness in the living room, waiting for his late return, just waiting to have a go at him.

He yanked the rear view mirror, adjusting it carelessly so that he was able to see nothing but his own reflection grinning back at him inanely.

"Another night ona coush for yhou . . . Fushin' bitsh!" he slurred with drunken conviction.

Since Molly had given birth to their first child Michelle, little Shelley, Derek had found the combination of very little sleep and very long hours at the office too much for him. And on top of that, Molly was giving him a hard time for his recent drinking habits.

She would complain incessantly about the excessive hours he worked and consequently, the amount of time he spent in the pub afterwards. She had told him that the combination of both was affecting his role of husband and father.

To add insult to injury, not only had Molly deemed him an unfit husband and father; she had refused point blank to allow him near their daughter until he had quit his drinking.

"Fushin' Bish!" he reiterated, slapping the dash vehemently. Did that stupid cow know about work anyway? She had never worked a day in her damn life.

Derek reached blindly over to the passenger seat for his cigarettes, fumbling one handed, desperately wrestling a single smoke from the red and white pack. Finally, he lit the cigarette and glanced up. A smattering of rain had obscured his view ahead; he clicked on the wipers, straining his eyes to peer into the mist, searching for a clue to where he was.

A hazy view of the road ahead, revealed a diminutive figure, the form of a small child, clad in white. Derek stamped hard on the brake, but it was too late. During his inebriated daze, the speed of the BMW had crept up, he was speeding and the momentum of the car sent it on a screeching collision course, ploughing into the child.

The impact shook the car, the slight form crumpled onto the bonnet and the girl's pale porcelain face struck the windshield hard, collapsing on contact. The glass spider-webbed and a crimson pulpy mass protruded, dead centre, leaving a tangled clump of matted hair and scalp wedged in the ragged shards as the girl rolled off the slowing vehicle to the ground with a sickly wet slap.

The car rolled to a halt. Derek froze, hands gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white. His chest heaved as he hyperventilated in short, moaning breaths, on the verge of shock.

His mind played the moment over and over in slow motions, like a morbid rerun, sobering him quickly. He stared at the hunk of hairy flesh, snagged in the jagged points of the broken window, inches from his face. Thin rivulets of blood ran down the frosted incline of the windscreen, spreading, like narrow fingers. He could hear the pat-pat-pat of the child's blood trickling through the fracture, and dripping onto the dashboard.

Derek opened the door, retched and vomited onto the cold tarmac.

Finally, when he had gathered what he could of his composure, he stood and tottered weakly, weaving his way towards the slight form which lay sprawled on the road a few feet back.

The girl's limbs spread at impossible angles, her broken body splayed limply. It was difficult to gauge her age; by her size, Derek placed her at around twelve. Her features were wiped, completely from her face, her pale beauty gone; instead her broken skull appeared deflated, and the contents of her head had spilled onto the road, a mass of gore. She wore a once-white nightdress, now completely stained red.

Derek began to sob, lowering to his knees beside the corpse, and covering his face as his entire body heaved and trembled with grief.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm so, so sorry," he whined, over and over, reaching for the broken corpse.

As his trembling hand drew nearer, the girl moved the slightest, almost undetectable twitch.

Derek jerked his hand away quickly, as though burned and then lowered his head to road level, peering into the gaping cavern where the girls face had been, hoping he could detect even the slightest, shallow breath.

The gelatinous mass of gore shifted slightly inside the ruptured concavity and Derek recoiled, jumping to his feet, yet transfixed as two grey, tapered tentacles wormed their way out of the girl's ruined head. Derek gaped disbelievingly as the appendages weaved and undulated through the air above the corpse slowly, as though moving underwater. A clicking sound filled the otherwise silent air, and the dead girl sat up.

Derek shrieked with fright and began to moan, taking a retreating step back as the limp corpse rose from the ground into the air, as though propelled by some unseen force. A grotesque life-size marionette controlled by an invisible puppeteer.

The mashed body of the dead girl hovered there for a few moments. The cephalic tentacles appeared to protrude from a wound in the girl's jaw where her mandible dangled loosely. They squirmed, independent of each other, living entities, dancing to the music of Derek's fear.

He turned to flee, but his drunken legs failed him, folding beneath his weight, and he collapsed in a heap. The floating entrails shot forth, extending and wrapping round Derek's ankles, pulling him near the blood soaked terror levitating above him.

The dead girl leaned toward Derek as he writhed and bucked, trying to free himself from the creature's vice-like clutches. In seconds, she was directly above him, hovering horizontally, the remains of her thick hair flapping wildly as a stray gust of wind caught her. Derek opened his mouth wide to scream, but a dripping clot of gelatinous brain tissue flopped from the girl's mangled cranium into his mouth, momentarily silencing him. He gagged and spat the cold, grey matter on to the tarmac, then followed it with an ear shattering scream as the dead girl dropped upon him.

When Derek awoke he was still screaming, drenched in sweat and tangled in his thin bed sheets, with the nightmare fresh in his mind.

He sat up, sighing irritably and snatched the bottle from his bedside cabinet, draining the dregs of the remaining whiskey. Sleep kept bad company these days, his terrifying nightmare had proven testimony of that. Looking in the mirror at his haggard face, he prodded the swollen bags under his eyes once or twice, and then made for the kitchen. If it wasn't sleep time, then it must be coffee time.

Flicking on the kettle, he stared out the large, kitchen window. From five floors up, on a clear night like tonight, he could see the familiar, surrounding landmarks in detail. The little newsagent on the corner, bathed in the soft, orange glow of the streetlights, the police station in the distance, a myriad of illuminated squares projected into the night from the occupied offices. Midweek, there would not be much call for 'on the beat' Bobbies.

The kettle bubbled and clicked and Derek poured steaming hot water into a large cafetiere, adding a sizeable dash of whiskey from his stash beneath the kitchen sink. His eyes wandered the bleak horizon lazily.

Suddenly, the landscape was plunged into darkness.

"Another flamin' power cut," he mumbled irritably, sipping bitter coffee from a mug with the word, 'DAD' emblazoned in bold black letters. The caffeine, rushed through his tired body, revitalizing, and stimulating the

sluggish synapses in his brain, then the whiskey counter-attacked and returned him to his semi-drunken state. His eyes flicked up toward the bare light bulb, swaying slightly in the mild breeze, and blazing bright through the penetrating darkness outside. Derek marched to the wall and pushed the switch, immediately, light flooded the room once again and darkness retreated back into the night. He winced slightly at the momentary pain in his eyes. Curious, the cut obviously hadn't affected the flats this time.

He caught his emaciated reflection on the surface of the window, and decided upon extinguishing the kitchen light after all, returning to the window.

Out in the darkened street, a solitary streetlamp fizzled and sparked into life. It burned furiously and focused its cold, electric brightness on a single point beneath, where a small child, a little girl, stood staring into the night.

Derek glanced at the illuminated face of his watch, it read just after three o'clock in the morning. Fear rose from the pit of his stomach, he thought the nightmare had returned. He pinched himself on the upper arm, and gasped, as a sharp pain accompanied a swelling bruise. No nightmare, he was awake, not lying on his bed dreaming of being awake. Which meant, the young girl was really there, and lost, or in some sort of peril.

He gazed out of the window, watching her for a while. He feared some wrong might befall her, and he couldn't have that on his already weighted conscience. If anything were to happen, he would feel culpable, and rightly so, now that he was aware of her presence.

The crisp air caught in Derek's throat once or twice, resulting in a hacking cough. He switched the small torch on and swatted it until the beam strengthened, then made a beeline for the only working lamp in the street, swishing the torch back and forth before him, carefully planning his footsteps in the dark to avoid the squelching mulch and animal droppings.

She stood, stock still, staring up the street, in the same position she was in when Derek first spotted her. Not even the wind stirred her little white nightdress. Her golden halo of blonde hair glowed in the stark, glare of the streetlamp.

"Hello." He began tentatively, "I'm Derek, what's your name?"

Finally, the girl moved,"Hi." She replied brightly, a wide smile, lighting her pale face which Derek found a little unsettling given the unusual circumstances. He had half expected to find her in a state of panic.

Her eyes fixed directly on his, and immediately, Derek experienced the most profound feeling of déjà vu, evoking powerful emotions, which teetered on the outer rim of his memories, barely evading meaning. He pushed them to the back of his mind.

"I'm Sarah," she said, turning to stare up the street again, dismissing Derek.

"Where's your mummy and daddy, Sarah? Are you lost?" He crouched to her level, hoping she would turn and face him. He didn't want her to be afraid of him; he wanted to help, he wanted to atone for his sins. He dashed the thought away dismissively as it rose in his gut, and the familiar, wrenching feeling of remorse threatened to overpower him. He needed a drink.

"Not lost, waiting." The girl said.

Derek remained silent for a few heartbeats, expecting the girl to elaborate. "Waiting on whom? Your mum and dad?"

The girl called Sarah nodded distractedly, her gaze remained fixed along the darkened road. Derek followed her line of vision. A few yards up the street, a car crawled through the syrupy gloom. As the vehicle approached, night parted around the black bonnet, revealing a small, circular BMW logo.

Derek stared, agape at the emerging BMW. The windscreen, was smashed, frosted fragments still intact in the frame. In the centre of the window, a jagged void spilled forth a slick, dark fluid, separating, and running down the ruined glass in branching rivulets. From deep inside the recess of the dark hole, thin undulating appendages slithered out into the winter air.

Derek whimpered and scuttled back on all fours, then, covering his eyes with his hands, coiled him-self into a tight ball on the frozen tarmac. The car rolled on, at a hearse's pace; a morbid reminder of his downfall.

It couldn't be. He had taken particular care to conceal the BMW. That night, after the accident, he had sped to the Holden Woods, distraught and shocked into sobriety, and driven the car into the lake. The next morning, he had reported it stolen; inventing the poor excuse that he had absent mindedly left the keys in the ignition while in Danny's Bar, drinking himself into a stupor. No one could possibly know it was there, buried in the murky depths of Holden loch under a mass of shifting silt and discarded debris.

He lay on the hard ground, trembling, racked with fear and guilt, coupled with the sharp stabbing, abdominal pains of alcohol withdrawal, alcohol which he had been so dependent on these past few years.

A small, cold hand touched his shoulder, and he jerked with fright.

"Derek, are you alright?" The little girl called Sarah asked concernedly, recoiling slightly from his reaction to her touch.

He raised his head tentatively to where he had last seen the BMW. It was gone. He scrambled to his feet, head twisting this way and that, desperately, searching for the vehicle. There was no sign.

Derek rubbed his head, and sighed.

"Um, yea, fine." He muttered, "You shouldn't be out on your own at this time. See the light up there in that block of flats?"

Again, the girl said nothing; she merely nodded, stealing a fleeting glance at the solitary point of light which Derek pointed to.

"Well, that's my home. Do you want to wait there, and we can watch for your mum and dad somewhere warm." He waited expectantly. Then, unexpectedly, the child turned, smiled and took his hand.

Derek didn't have much in the way of children's movies; in fact, he didn't have much in the way of anything anymore. He raked through a pile of old VHS tapes, rattling noisily while Sarah sat perched on a tall stool at the kitchen window, staring up the street again.

Near the bottom of the pile, he caught sight of a garish, mustard colored case and pulled it from the array of tapes. Scooby-Doo, it had been one of Shelley's. He choked down a rising sob and emptied the last of the whiskey from the glass he had feverishly filled upon reaching the flat.

Derek pushed the tape into the recorder and pushed play. The familiar introduction theme began, and he marched through to the kitchen, swaying slightly.

"Schcooby doo. You like Scooby?" He slurred at Sarah, fighting the urge to flick on the kitchen light. The little girl's white nightdress appeared to almost glow in the darkness, giving her slight form a spectral appearance.

"It's all right Derek, I'll just wait here," she said, a little too quietly.

Derek frowned, nodded, and returned to the living area. He watched the cartoon for a few moments, evoking powerful memories of cozy evenings on the couch with Molly and Shelley, then clicked the TV off.

Sleep always came easily when Derek had drunk his fill of whiskey. A soft seat and the warm fuzzy, protective aura which alcohol provided was

all he needed. But as always, sleep was accompanied by terrible visions, contorted memories of the past, a past which had turned him from the man with everything, to the wreck he was presently. Remorse battered his addled being with sticks and stones of guilt and helplessness. He would never be the man he had once been, it was too late; he had lost everything.

Molly had left him and taken little Shelley with her, several weeks later he had received the divorce papers through the post. He had lost his job, too many mornings after the night before. His life had been destroyed by guilt and alcohol.

Sleep dragged at him, luring him into the darkness.

In his alcohol fuelled dream world, he stood before the BMW, staring down at a small form. There was no blood this time, the girl appeared unharmed, curled into the fetal position, and her chest rose and deflated with shallow breaths.

"Are you okay?" Derek asked tentatively, kneeling down next to the girl and placing a hand gently on her side.

She turned, facing Derek, and with a start, he recognized her. It was the little lost girl, Sarah.

"I'm okay, Derek, are you alright?" She asked, her little eyebrows drawn together in a look of deep concern.

Derek felt strange, not alarmed, quite calm, but strange.

"No" He said simply. "I'm not okay." Then he added, "Who are you?"

"You ride the tide of remorse, carrying you to loneliness and desperation; washed up on the island of desolation, with no-one and nothing."

Derek gaped at Sarah, he hadn't expected such adult language to come from the little girl. Then he remembered he had dozed off. The analogy was more likely to have come from his subconscious.

"What do I do?" He asked Sarah desperately, who had gotten to her feet and was staring down at Derek, her bright blue eyes radiating innocence.

"You cannot continue to deny the past."

Consciousness snagged, Derek, propelling him back into the waking world, with knowledge he had hidden from himself for far too long. He knew the girl in his kitchen, he had seen her before.

Derek jerked awake, and staggered with effort through to his bedroom, yanking drawers free from wardrobes and various chests until he found what he was looking for. At the bottom, he dug out numerous blank divorce forms, and a dog eared, yellowing newspaper with the headline,'Sleepwalking Girl Killed in Hit and Run Tragedy'.

Shaking the newspaper open, he smoothed the crease with the flat of his palms. There, gazing up from the centre of the front page, with a joyous smile painted upon her pale face, was the girl in Derek's kitchen.

He reeled, throwing the tabloid across the room as though scalded. The pages separated, scattering around the bedroom. Derek clutched the windowsill, panting, attempting to slow his hammering heart, and calm his fraying nerves. There was a dead girl in his kitchen, a girl he had killed.

He had to check, had to be sure that it wasn't just another nightmare. But his legs would not obey, and he remained, rooted to the spot. A thunderous clatter echoed through the flat and he forced himself towards the source of the cacophony.

Standing at the kitchen door, eyes downcast through fear of what terrible vision lay beyond he raised a trembling hand and clicked the wall switch. The flickering strip-light illuminated the room, chasing the darkness away and Derek slowly raised his head.

The girl stood, still staring out at the window into the darkness. The stool she had sat on had toppled over, and it lay on its side on the tiled floor.

"Sarah?" No answer.

Had she gotten taller in the past half hour? Then Derek noticed that her feet were several inches above the ground; she remained, suspended in thin air. Sarah began to jerk and tremble, as though in the throes of a fit, her hands flapping wildly at her sides, her hair a halo of whipping tangles. In the window, the surface reflected a yawning gap where Sarah's face had been moments before. Derek watched in horror as slick tendrils slid from the wound.

He backed away slowly in an attempt to get past her, but the door slammed shut behind him. He yanked the door handle in desperation, shaking the entire frame frantically, and swearing when the cheap handle bent in his hands. When he turned, slamming his back flat against the door in an attempt to put as much distance as possible between the creature and himself, she was facing him, drifting above the tiled floor, towards him.

As the kitchen light fizzled and blinked off, panic consumed Derek. He wailed in fear and disgust and launched himself through the full length, glass door panel. The glass shattered, spraying a glittering mass of thin shards. He quickly scrambled across the carpeted living room floor. Razor sharp pinpricks penetrated Derek's skin, tearing his flesh and leaving a thick, crimson smear in his wake, across the tan carpet. But he didn't notice the pain; he scrabbled across the carpet, babbling incoherently.

Still, the levitating apparition approached. Tentacles whipped this way and that in a blind frenzy, feelers searching for something, something to grasp and squeeze. The girl's hands were closed tight, balled into white knuckled fists, and her entire body jerked and juddered with the swishing momentum of the undulating grey tendrils.

Derek held his hands out before him to ward the creature off, throwing himself back, until his head rebounded off of the solid wooden windowsill with an audible crack. Pain shot through the rear of his head and he clutched his neck, bringing his knees up, curling into himself on the floor, miserably awaiting his fate.

Derek lay, sobbing, for a time. Minutes passed, and when the creature hadn't made its move, he peeked from the corner of his hand, eyes darting to every corner of the room. The apparition was gone.

Dawn was making a timely presence, flooding the living room with a glaring, winter sunlight. Derek lifted his pounding head, wincing at the pain, and clutched the windowsill, leaving a red smear as he prepared to stand. When he did, the pain was immense. A searing sensation from the torn flesh of his arms and legs and the throb in his skull from the blow to the back of his head, coupled with the dry-mouthed prelude to a hangover.

He eyed the lengthy, dark stain on the carpet; he had lost a lot of blood, he felt weak and in need of medical attention. Lifting his arms, Derek studied the tears in his shirt and the criss-cross of crimson gashes running the length of his forearms. A sizeable shard of glass protruded from his wrist. He swayed as dizziness set in and he became light headed. Reaching out for the windowsill again to steady himself, his slick hand slid and he hit the floor hard.

Consciousness wavered, and in the few moments of limbo he experienced, Sarah's voice echoed through his aching skull.

"You ride the tide of remorse…"

He crawled to the small coffee table in the corner where the telephone sat and snatched the receiver up with a slick hand. Wedging the receiver in the crook of his neck, he tapped three digits for the emergency services. Blood cascaded from his forehead, spattering the light, pine table top. He watched for a while as it formed a crimson pool while he waited for the operator to answer.

Derek hesitated for a heartbeat. After a time, he selected the desired emergency service.

“Police,” he uttered hesitantly, making his selection sound almost like a question.

It was time for a confession.

Asylum

David S. Pointer

Victorian era hair-wreaths adorned
the asylum walls as did extra-large

examination mirrors untouched by
annual window cleaning commotion,

Wifey grew fearful when phantoms
appeared wearing aviation-goggles

with thick lenses crafted from old
embalming bottle-glass-bottoms

giving the floating apparitions the
appearance of being bookworms

back from the locked down dead,
but they were actually fitting my

new bride for her veiled widow's
hat as I screamed listening to the

eulogies-in-progress drenched in
red beloveth pools siphoned out

of the final fight of my existence

The Lurkers

Thomas M. Malafarina

The hall light never seemed to be bright enough. Tommy watched it dimly glowing behind its yellowed bowel-shaped ornate glass globe. He had become very familiar with its raised floral pattern, having stood staring at it many times in his past ten years of life.

The meager ceiling light located at the top of the stairs was meant to provide sufficient illumination not only for the stairway but for the long frightening hallway appearing to go on forever, like a horrifying portal into a world of unknown terrors.

The hall led to an open door at its darkest end; Tommy's bedroom. His door was always open; he never closed it. He suspected someday he might want it closed for privacy, but not for the moment. Right now, privacy was the last thing he wanted to think about.

Instead, he wanted people around him, lots of people, the more the merrier; anything, but being alone with the dreadfully dark hall positioned between him and the sanctuary of his bedroom, looming out in front of him like a passageway to unimaginable horrors. Perhaps unimaginable was not the right word, because Tommy could imagine the horrors, in fact, he could imagine things much more horrible than most people would ever envision. And when he thought hard enough about these imaginings, they seemed to be completely real; and perhaps on some level they were.

Tommy could see his doorway waiting at the end of the hall, like a beckoning safe haven. All he had to do was make it to his room, then he could jump into his bed, pull the covers up over his head and they couldn't get him; the creatures he thought of as the Lurkers. Those beings that somehow managed to cross over into his world from whatever forbidden Hell they originated.

He stood with his back against the wall at the top of the stairs looking down at the light shining into the stairwell from the living room. He could hear the sounds of his parents and older sisters watching "My Three Sons" on their black and white Philco TV. He could hear the crotchety voice of Uncle Charlie complaining about something or other as always. Tommy recalled Uncle Charlie was a fairly new character to the show, having replaced the boy's grandfather Bub O'Casey, who Tommy overheard his

Dad say was too sick or too old or something. Although he liked the grandfather character, Uncle Charlie seemed to be pretty cool as well, that was, on those rare occasions when he was allowed to stay up to watch the show. The comforting sounds of the TV helped to relax his pounding heart, at least for the moment.

To Tommy's left, his parents' bedroom was visible through the open doorway, light from a nearby street light shown across the bed. Tommy never was afraid of this room, no matter how dark it might be because it was his Mom and Dad's room, and the Lurkers would never go in there.

He turned his head slowly to the right, looking down the dark menacing hallway. The right side of the hall is what he thought of as the "safe zone". His family lived in the end unit of a row home and the right side of the hall was attached to the house next door, so there was nowhere for them to hide along that wall. Often he would creep along that right side, his back pressed firmly against the wall, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

The left side of the hall was a completely different story; that was where all the trouble was. Along the left side were two doorways. The first led to his older sisters' bedroom and the last, which was adjacent to his bedroom, was for the family bathroom. Although he knew they could lurk in either room, for some reason the bathroom was the most frightening. Perhaps because it also had that horrifying huge cast iron bathtub, the one with four scary feet which looked like the clawed talons of an eagle. Often during the light of day when Tommy was using the toilet he would imagine those huge horrible feet would move, just a slight bit. He wondered if the tub might someday creep slowly toward him like a lumbering dinosaur, and crush him while he did his business.

And that also had a dark echoing drain. Tommy often imagined he heard voices coming out of that drain. But then again they were not so much voices as the chattering sounds a chipmunk or squirrel might make. But there was nothing pleasant about these sounds; in fact they seemed to be much deeper sounding and at times almost resembled a growl. The horrifying sounds he knew could only be the sounds they made; the Lurkers.

Tommy parents called his fears "irrational", although he was not quite sure what irrational meant he suspected it meant he was letting his imagination run away with him again. Whatever the meaning he knew

irrational or not they were as real to him as the sweat beading on his forehead right now.

It was strange how Tommy's fears worked. If it was daytime or someone else was in one of the rooms, Tommy was fine, because he knew the things which wanted him, the things lurking somewhere beyond the physical rooms themselves, didn't want anyone else and wouldn't come around if anyone else was present.

Tommy wasn't sure exactly what it was lurking behind those doorways at night and why they had chosen him. All he could ever see was blackness, but what he could imagine was much, much worse. He never envisioned clowns, werewolves, vampires or any of the typical fictional creatures other kids his age seemed to fear. No, Tommy's imaginings were much more frightening than anything so simple.

The beings he imagined had no real name other than the name he had given them because of the way the lurked in the shadows of the darkness, waiting. He feared these creatures more than anything. In his imagination Tommy saw these creatures as thin, grayish skinned beings who he envisioned occasionally looking out around the door frames at him down the dark hall with their extremely long slimy fingers and their dark black soulless eyes with blood red pinpoint pupils staring eagerly at him. Tommy didn't know what they wanted with him but was certain it was not friendship. He suspected if he walked by a doorway where one of the things was waiting, they might simply reach out their wet hands and gently brush his cheek. He somehow knew once he felt their horrible cold snake-like skin against his own flesh his heart might stop from fear and his parents would find him dead on the hall floor.

Tonight, like every other night when he was forced to go to bed before everyone else, Tommy found himself trembling in fear at the slow and frightening journey he had to take in order to reach his room. But tonight, Tommy hoped things might be a little different. Tonight he had something to help him battle his almost paralyzing fear and maybe those horrible Lurkers disappear forever.

Tommy's Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Fleisher had presented a special class this morning where she talked about fears young people have, such as fear of the dark, fear of heights and things like that. Tommy listened to her intently recalling her saying if he ever felt afraid, all he had to do is repeat the phrase, "There's nothing to be afraid of, God's always with me,"

and whatever his fear, he could defeat it with the power of God Almighty. Tonight, that phrase had become a mantra to Tommy which he repeated in a whisper over and over as he prepared to face his most dreaded fears and venture down the horrible corridor, past the lurking creatures.

"Are you in bed yet?" The stern voice of his father called up from downstairs, interrupting his mental repetitions. Tommy covered his mouth with his hand to make his voice sound muffled and far away then replied, "Yeah Dad, I'm in bed. G'night." His father shouted, "You better be. Because if you're up there in the hall crying again, I'll come up there and give you something to cry about." He heard his sisters giggling in the background.

"Oh George! Leave him alone!" He heard his mother admonish. His Mom seemed to understand his fear no matter how irrational it might seem to everyone else, and this was a fact for which Tommy was extremely grateful. Perhaps he got his active imagination from his Mother and that was why she understood; he didn't know but was none-the-less thankful.

There had been many nights when Tommy would deliberately refuse to go upstairs to his room alone and would "act up" just so his father would get angry and chase him up the stairs and down the hall to his room. Even though Tommy knew a sharp whack on the backside awaited him when his father caught him, it was a thousand times better than facing the lurking things waiting along the hallway. Luckily his father was not the abusive type, so the sore backside he would receive would often go away within a few minutes. His dad was just a typical dad of the nineteen sixty's and was not opposed to giving spankings. Tommy figured a few minutes with a stinging backside was always much better than walking down the horrible hall alone.

But tonight he was determined to face his fear head on, armed with his new special God inspired phrase. And Tommy was sure with the power of God, himself, no lurking thing could harm him. Tommy stepped tentatively away from the wall and keeping his hands by his side, turned to his right, and focusing his eyes on his bedroom doorway and started walking slowly down the center of the hall.

In his mind, he began reciting, "There's nothing to be afraid of, God's always with me," over and over, his lips moving in cadence with his thoughts. With each frightening step he repeated his powerful phrase, confident no evil thing would be able to touch him. Eyes still focused on his

bedroom, after about five steps he estimated he was passing his sisters' bedroom doorway. He squeezed his eyes shut, as he did not want to see the creatures' beady red pupils staring out at him. Even if his newfound power prevented them from getting him, he still didn't want to see them. That, he could certainly do without.

He took a few additional steps and re-opened his eyes figuring the doorway was now behind him. For a moment he feared one of the creatures might be looking around the doorway at him and he imagined its long slimy fingers reaching for the back of his neck. Immediately he repeated the phrase in his mind, "There's nothing to be afraid of God's always with me," and he imagined the thing pulling its fingers back as if it had just touched a scalding hot stove. It was working! Tommy's new weapon from Sunday school was driving back the evil creatures.

With a newfound confidence he continued to walk down the hall, repeating his mantra over and over, feeling an invisible shield forming around him like a giant glowing shell of protection. When he was about four feet from his bedroom doorway, he considered running the remaining distance, past the bathroom and into the safety of his bedroom, but then changed his mind. He was now protected and knew the lurkers couldn't touch him. He wanted to beat back this fear forever now and decided if he could look this horror directly in the face he could quite possibly destroy the creatures.

He stopped in front of his bedroom doorway, knowing the bathroom was now directly to his left. He thought he could hear the lurkers inside in the dark, their squirrel like chittering sounds echoing in his mind. It was now or never, time to put up or shut up. He repeated his phrase over and over blocking out the sounds of the creatures, "There's nothing to be afraid of, God's always with me. There's nothing to be afraid of God's always with me."

Tommy pivoted on his heels and looked directly into the darkness of the bathroom staring hard, daring of the horrid beings to come forward and challenge him and his newfound power, but there was nothing; nothing but the darkness of the empty bathroom. He was amazed. He had done it. He had made it all the way down the hall without any incident and now most, if not all of his fears were gone. He had beaten the hall, he had beaten the Lurkers and they would ever be able to frighten him again.

He started to turn with confidence to go to his room when he heard someone call his name. The voice sounded old, high pitched, raspy and barely human. “Tommy” the harsh voice chittered. He was unable to complete his turn, frozen in fear at the sound coming from the darkness. He tried to recall his mantra, tried to repeat his mystical phrase but could not. He imagined his protective shell being splintered with millions of tiny cracks spreading around it as it fell apart piece by piece. Again he heard his name “Tommy”. He had never heard it said in such a terrible way.

As he stood frozen, staring into the darkness he saw the fingers, the long waving slimy fingers snaking their way toward him out of the blackness. Again he tried to recall his mantra but could not; his mind having gone completely blank. Behind the creeping hands Tommy saw blood red pin point eyes glowing in the darkness. The dancing fingers came out of the doorway, into the hall, and each hand reached out and touched the sides of Tommy’s face, as his mother had lovingly done many times in the past, but there was nothing loving about this ice cold and clammy touch.

It felt to Tommy as if the fingers were sucking the heat from his body as he began to tremble; the red eyes coming even closer. Now the dead hands supported Tommy’s convulsing body, as his legs gave out under him. The last thing Tommy remembered seeing was an enormous mouth full of hundreds of needle-like teeth opening unimaginably wide and coming toward his face, and then a foul sulfur-like odor coming from deep inside the thing. Then his vision went completely black.

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“Tommy, here’s your lunch,” his mother said in her most cheerful voice. She sat on the edge of his bed, next to Tommy, as she had done every day for the past several months. Tommy did not answer; he never did. He simply sat staring out into the hall, his once brown hair now a shock of pure white, his once intelligent face, now appearing slack and catatonic. Soft mushy food dribbled down his chin with a stream of drool. On occasion his lips would move and seemed to be repeating some type of phrase over and over, but his parents were never able to make out what he said.

It Only Happens at Night…

Sergio "ente per ente" Palumbo
Edited by Michele Dutcher

'Cyfaill cywir mewn ing y'i gwelir'.
(A true friend will be shown in adversity)
Ancient Welsh proverb

'Mwyaf y brys, mwyaf y rhwystr', the boy of almost 10 years told himself. Those words simply meant that if someone hurried more, then there were commonly more obstacles. True, indeed, and he was now running short of time as well. The colors across the western sky meant nothing to Dewey, except that the harbinger of dusk had already come to those rolling hills and the small rocky outcrops all around him. His grandfather Iwan had told him not to go out at night, the boy knew it very well, as some animals went to sleep during that time, while other nocturnal beings -- including a few fabled creatures, the most ancient of things -- awoke and were active only over the course of those dark hours. But he had to find and retrieve the two sheep from their small farm that he had inadvertently lost during the course of the day.

The air was humid, as it frequently was during the early summer, but the boy still felt a clear sensation of uneasiness and everything made him break out in a cold sweat in the end. Dewey sighed, partially out of exasperation, and partially because he was also getting tired. Having searched for those animals for more than four hours hadn't proved to be enough; it just seemed that there was really nothing more to do. '*Damn the moment I was distracted*', he thought to himself. But now it was late to reproach his actions or to wish it had never happened. It had occurred, and that was all that mattered. Now it was time to remedy his mistake and find those two ewes in order to bring them back to the rest of the herd at home, before his grandfather discovered it and became really upset. The boy didn't like to see him like that, of course: it wasn't good for his back, nor for his face, as the beatings he had already received under such circumstances were very bad, and he didn't want to undergo such treatment again soon, clearly.

Dewey's limp, blonde hair spilled in several tangles around his shoulders and the wide, worn-out shirt he wore hardly concealed his

emaciated body. Only two vivid chestnut eyes stood out from his still boyish face. The grayish shorts he had on showed two fast though slim legs that he appeared to be very accustomed to using, in order to walk up and down that difficult terrain every day. For some time, the boy kept watching the surroundings, quickly moving the short dead branch that he was used to bringing along as a sort of walking stick. In reality, that thing represented the only weapon at his disposal in case he stumbled onto some wild animals while hoping to find some traces of the sheep along the way or to spot their woolen, whitish coats somewhere in the distance. At a certain moment, a sudden thought crossed his mind and Dewey was afraid that they might have already been eaten by some wolves or have fallen down the steep slopes of the few outcrops around. Anyway, it was just pointless worrying too much or fearing the worst at present. All that was left to do was to keep searching and wishing himself good luck, in the end…

It was late, but maybe it was a little too early to give up all hope after all. A typical kid of that age, Dewey had an abundance of energy and felt the urge to bustle about more and more. If he could make it back in time, then nothing bad would happen. If only he could stop complaining about his own lot, then maybe he would find and bring those two sheep back home before darkness came.

That part of Wales was a maritime county, bordered by the sea and the coastline, which was comprised of numerous bays and beaches. The scenery was relatively flat, the local economy relying heavily on agriculture that was really important throughout the whole area, along with sheep farming, of course. There were also a few historic towns and other smaller settlements. The highest point was at Foel Cwmcerwyn, about 1750 feet in the Preseli Hills, a wide stretch of high moorland with many prehistoric remains. Historically they had suffered from devastating Viking assaults during the Viking Age, but on the other hand, the region itself had many wealthy villages that were the result of old Viking trading posts. The large summer fairs were of great importance in the life of the farming communities, for they would be attended not only by the peasants of the countryside, but by some eight or ten shrewd, wealthy men of power from North Wales, as well as people coming from the towns of south-west.

Dewey had been told by the elders and his grandfather that the country itself had undergone some difficult moments, especially over the course of the last years. Even though he hadn’t paid too much attention to

their words, the last few decades had surely been a time of great alterations in the structure of the territory and new challenges for the common life, certainly. In 1485 Henry VII Tudor, who was born at Pembroke Castle, just in the vicinity, had landed an army not far from his birthplace, then he had marched through Wales to Bosworth Field before finally defeating the larger army of Richard III. That king also founded the Tudor dynasty which afterwards would rule England for two centuries. After the conquest, the Act of Union of 1536 had divided the county into hundreds of plats, which followed with some modifications the lines of the ancient division into *cantrefs*, which went back to before the Norman invasions. The whole of Wales was converted into shires and the reorganization itself was a way to secure additional financial resources from the country with far less trouble than constantly having to secure local consent as before. Things did not go easily for the rest of the population, anyway…

Actually, the exact title 'Act of Union' wasn't used at that time, but it really ended the distinction between the principality and the so-called March; moreover, the law of England was to be the only law of Wales and, to administer it, justices of the peace were appointed in every county. Wales was to be represented in Parliament by 26 members.

The act of 1536 lacked precision, as a matter of fact, so a further act in 1543 had filled in the details. It created a distinct Welsh system of courts based upon four three-county circuits, and it also gave statutory recognition to the Council of Wales at Ludlow, a body which had extensive administrative and legal power. *But were the Welsh, then, now in line with the English?* The answer was, curiously, no. This happened because it was stated that any holder of a lordship in Wales could claim a payment from his tenants when one lord succeeded another by way of what was called a 'mise'. This was a lucrative source of revenue for any lord, and the reason for its inclusion in both 'Acts of Union' could be understood only when one comprehended that the king himself was the holder of all but very few of the old 'Marcher' lordships in Wales by 1536. The payment of these mises was a distinguishing feature in Wales, and it took precedence over the subsidies granted by Parliament. This was specified in successive tax grants, and led to specific requests from some areas to be excused from paying parliamentary taxes.

But there were also some ironic mistakes, according to what his grandfather had once told Dewey. For instance, the payment of taxes on

sheep in Breconshire was so delayed by the numerous mises that had to be paid during this period, that the taxes were not sent until years after it was due. Such a payment was recorded as the second installment that was to be paid, but it had already been abolished without the people of Breconshire knowing this. Significantly, it is not recorded that this needless payment was ever returned to the shepherds in the end.

While plunging into that deserted moorland, the boy looked at the dim scenery that surrounded him. The welsh area was frequently presented as 'poor little Wales', a land of backward impoverishment lagging behind its 'progressive' English counterpart. It was thought of as a country lacking towns and even rejecting urban civility, but this wasn't the right picture of it at that time, particularly with regard to urban life. Port towns in north and south Wales revealed that they already surpassed most urban centers in south-west England. For example, Iwan had told him months ago that people assumed that the wealthiest inhabitant of Cardiff during this period had goods valued at a highly enviable £102 –-- seriously wealthy for the time - and this wealthiest of Cardiff inhabitants, far from being a non-Welsh urban incomer, sported a Welsh name – Thomas ab Owen. However, Barnstable contributed only 5 pounds more than Cardiff to the 1543-44 collection…

Other than that, in many border towns there were a goodly amount of artisans with occupations ranging from metal working, to textile refining, and gunpowder manufacturing. Some larger locations welcomed immigrants from far and wide, including considerable immigration from over the border itself.

In a way, the provisions of the 'Acts of Union' hadn't constituted a complete assimilation of the entirety of Wales into England. But, apart from all the military and political events of the period, even though of great significance, life hadn't changed much in 1546 in the small multi-hued Welsh village of Efailwen Dewey himself was from, the same could be said about farming and hunting in the whole area, of course. This was still a rural society, mostly, where the vast majority of men lived close to the land and the people either farmed themselves, or else, much less commonly, they traded in the agricultural products raised locally. Besides the most common crops, the other main agricultural activities were farming of cattle for milk and cheese, along with sheep farming -- like the ones his grandfather raised -- undoubtedly.

Lifting his blonde head of hair from the verdant ground, Dewey sighed again and looked around, clearly disheartened. From the coast, the boy had begun making his way inland through the Preseli Hills. That area was commonly referred to as insidious and frightening: *a place where strange things had occurred, even though a few people also thought that the waters flowing in the surroundings had some healing effects*. That was the place itself he was going through now, and it wasn't too far away from **Carn Menyn** - a grouping of craggy rock outcrops in the those hills in the Welsh county of Pembroke Shire. The name meant 'Butter Rock' and it was believed by some to have been the main source for the bluestones used at several prehistoric sites across the land.

Carn Menyn consisted of an outcrop of white spotted dolerite similar to that of other such territories in the area, and several other ancient locations that had already been identified nearby. On the other hand, Wales was dotted almost everywhere with the ruins of many castles, too, recalling a history etched in violence in many ways - so ancient stone walls and very old remains of lost quarries were not a rare sight around, even though that fact didn't make them less troublesome to the boy, of course.

Dewey always felt uneasy whenever he went to such a lonely and silent area. Actually, it wasn't as if he came around frequently, even in the morning, as the place was said to be full of ghosts from the oldest times that roamed the land even during daylight. By looking at those outcrops and the overall scenery it wasn't strange that the local peasants thought about such a location as being haunted. And if they who were surely older and much more experienced than he was usually preferred to stay away, well, the boy had deeper reasons and terrifying reasons to do the same - under ordinary circumstances. But *these were not common circumstances*, and Dewey had to go on, notwithstanding his fears and all the bad sensations that filled his mind.

On the upper part of the outcrop there was a steep-sided portion with a bank of stones across its neck, and the rock formations had some unusual shapes, each naturally resembling strange features that seemed to form into pillars or objects like that. Semi-worked ancient structures lay spread around, apparently having been simply levered out from the larger boulders. According to the few things the boy knew about it all, that area had been used by the farming community for at least 300 years for the collection of

lintels and building slabs, as long as passage by means of horse-drawn sleds and carts was possible.

Dewey just needed to have a rest, so he remained at the place for a short time and drank some water he had brought along, his mind always being alert, clearly. Then, in an unexpected way, he raised both of his eyes and finally found one of the two. The calm sheep was grazing near some herbs, using its lips to select parts of the plant that were higher in nutrition without being afraid of the oncoming darkness, apparently. It took the boy only a few moments before noticing that the second of the ewes was also there - next to an elevated place past a wide boulder, and that sheep was doing exactly the same thing. *Blessed unawareness*! Those mindless ovines certainly didn't know the old saying that warned that 'at night, to his own dark fancies, a weak and slow prey lay like a tortoise turned upside down'... And highwaymen, brigands and thieves were the least troublesome within that moorland, as even worse wild beasts could suddenly appear in the open and grab them in a single, bloody gesture, sure thing.

The position they were in now would be much more easily accessed from a small slope stretching east of the path he was on, so the boy slightly deviated from the planned route and went on a bit further, in order to skirt the rock formation on one side.

At least he had discovered both of them, he told himself breathing a sigh of relief. But it took a while before he could move the two away from the boulder, unfortunately. It was now getting really late, so Dewey tried to hurry up as the next day's weather forecast -- according to what his grandfather had told him that morning -- called for rain. That old man seemed to be very capable of foretelling what the sky would look like in the near future, the boy didn't know how he did it, but he always was right. As Iwan was so accurate about such things, Dewey was afraid that the rain might even start before the dark of the night, now that the sun had completely set. He didn't want to be caught in the middle of a downpour along with their two sheep, now that he had finally found them again. Therefore, he continued west to their farm, then caught a glimpse of the bay and half an hour later he was looking south along the coastline.

And it was exactly at that point that it happened!

While the boy was hurriedly leading the two ewes using his branch to continuously line them up, he caught a glimpse of a short figure, a black shape on all fours - or at least that was what he thought he saw. It was

difficult to see clearly through that dimness that had already started wrapping everything in its grasp. At first, given the size he noticed, the boy thought it could be a wolf, or a sort of big dog, even though the further details he spotted made him think it was something much worse, and much more frightening…

What if it was a fabled gwyllgi? Most of the local population had heard of such strange creatures being sighted across the countryside. Had he really stumbled onto such a fearful creature, had he truly become so unlucky today? Well, those were merely superstitions, so why shouldn't it simply be a real wolf? After all, wasn't a wolf enough trouble?

Many thoughts crossed the boy's mind as the moonless night fell over the land. The old Saxons themselves called that darkness the 'death mist' for reasons Dewey didn't want to remember. He was already scared enough! In a way, he knew very well how to start a camp-fire, but that required time and if he stopped and attempted it, that thing could easily get to where he was and he would be assailed before being ready. Other than that, he only had that old branch at his disposal, not enough to start a lasting fire, but it might be used as a small flaming piece of wood, and that might be better than nothing, actually. The decision was hard to make, but Dewey had to do something, he was well aware of it, but the problem was what could he do to improve his situation?

While thinking, and apparently still undecided and incapable of bringing himself to follow a clear line of action, the boy started walking again at a very fast pace, turning back from time to time in order to check the movements and the position of the wild animal that was tailing him. Great was Dewey's bewilderment as he found that the creature was still nearby and hadn't lost any ground. Of course, he knew that if it was just a wolf and if it started running, he would have no chance at all, as no man could outrun such a beast across those rolling hills, or even on flat ground, especially in the darkness. On the other hand, his pursuer didn't seem to be ready to attack him yet, so maybe it was a sort of wait and see game… In fact, that might even be more of a worry, because that wolf could be the first one of his pack that was scouting things out, in search of the right moment and the right place to rejoin the other wolves, so they could make their deadly move together, maybe.

‘*What can I do?*’ Dewey asked himself, while he kept moving, quickening his speed. He really didn’t know… If the wolf was the first one of his pack, he would find no way out, certainly, and soon the other wolves would come for him and the two sheep, too. On the other hand, leaving one of his sheep behind him so that the wild animals could have their tasty prey and start eating, focusing on such easy target and letting Dewey run away wouldn’t be a good idea either. First of all, he would lose one of their precious sheep that way, and their farm required all the ewes they had if they wanted to keep living and paying the taxes due. Moreover such a decision wouldn’t necessarily prove to be the right one in the end, as the bloody beasts might try to seize him as well - along with the saved sheep, if they were really hungry and there were a lot of them around.

Dewey was just beginning to be deeply, fiercely terrorized and his fear of the dark -- that he had always had -- along with the many warnings he had been told about by his grandfather, and also the numerous cruel tales and fearful legends about the beasts of the night the boy had been told since he was a child in the village of Efailwen, made him more and more scared.

The gwyllgi were said to be legendary frightful apparitions with terrible breath and blazing eyes, they were also referred to as ‘The Dogs of Real Darkness’. Their favorite places to appear were lonely roads at night, chasing unwary travelers without ceasing. One of those creatures was also reputed to resemble a mastiff, though a large one, but the dimness around hurt Dewey’s ability to see the true features of the creature. There was a distinct glow to them, variously described in the legends as being like stars or coals aflame. Actually, the boy was sure he had noticed a strange reflection in the beast’s eyes before, but that happened also when you looked directly at a dog’s or a wolf’s pupils, so how could he be sure about it? Unfortunately, common traditions usually stated that the sighting of an otherworldly dog coming out of the darkness could be a harbinger of impending death and that the man who had suddenly stumbled onto it would die soon after the encounter*! ‘Is today the moment I am going to die*?’ the boy asked himself, then started trembling visibly, and it was not because of the incoming cold of the night.

Knowing how the people widely thought that such creatures attacked men and wolves, eventually pulling them down, prevented poor Dewey from reasoning properly and filled his head with much mental confusion,

certainly. All of that didn't help him or let him devise a clear plan of action, even if a good plan had been possible, of course…

What was that beast waiting for? Why hadn't it attacked yet? How long was all of this chasing going to last? Maybe the creature just wanted to see him suffer, escape in a hurry or taste the smell of fear coming from his body, who knows? Whatever the true reason was, Dewey had to force his tired legs to go on now, to keep walking and hoping to find a way to save himself and his two sheep, even though he couldn't turn his mind to anything useful at moment…

The ewes scurried faster than the boy did, the problem being that he had many difficulties at properly leading them, because he was unable to clearly see the ground lying ahead of him and under his feet. So the rocks and hidden shrubs hindered his way and made him lose his balance from time to time. Nighttime had always been connected with danger and evil because of the human fear of the unknown and the dark's obstruction of the sense of sight. As a matter of fact, anything could be concealed in the darkness and obviously walking about without clearly seeing the uneven path you were following was dangerous undoubtedly. Other than that, many ghastly worries were agitating in the boy's mind, and a deep anxiety had already seized him.

Then another unpredictable thing occurred before the boy's eyes.

What had appeared to be a huge flower blossom in the ground -- given that it was very difficult to see clearly its shape in all that troublesome darkness -- suddenly jumped out of the surface and moved across the terrain. It seemed to be moving quickly, as a matter of fact, but the monster nearby seemed to notice that at once and started looking at him. It didn't take long before the running animal -- Dewey thought it could only be a sort of hare or some other game living around –- began being chased by the bigger creature.

With large pointed teeth, the beast jumped down the boulder and was quickly on its target, ending up with the small creature being strongly held between its extraordinary forelegs, completely beaten and with no way to escape its grip. The monster's grasp pressed its little body to the ground. Strange to say, but just for a moment the boy thought that the other animal, the small hare or whatever it was, seemed to be dressed in a tiny mining outfit, and something metallic had briefly shone on its paws…or were they very small hands? It was also incredible to think that the horrific conditions

he was experiencing at present would be conducive to even imagine such unreal things…

Then the black creature began voraciously eating its prey and Dewey clearly heard the noise of bones and of a small skull being easily shattered and smashed to pieces. It was difficult to look at the whole scene given the night's great darkness that enveloped almost everything around, but the gnashing and the other terrible sounds he was hearing gave enough evidence of what was going on not far from where he was hiding. A sort of stink made up of blood and entrails coming from that cruel scene reached his nose, too, or so it just seemed to him.

The boy stood motionless before a rocky outcrop whose features and outline he could only have a faint glimpse of under those difficult conditions, being shaken and uncertain in the cold wind of the night blowing from the sea in the distance.

For the moment, Dewey was tempted to flee across the darkness that before him, but his feet didn't respond nor was his will strong enough to force him to move away. About the two sheep, well, they had already run away, being lost again somewhere, and now he didn't have the strength left to search for them and reach them, for sure.

Actually, Dewey considered, were he to be honest with himself, he would have to concede that it was the terror of being noticed and clearly spotted by that monster that kept him there, making him wish that it all would end soon, and no harm would be caused to him. But the boy knew it was a poor hope, like when small children turn to the other side of the bed when they see a shadow in the room that frightens them and think that, just by not thinking about it, by not directly looking at it, that the danger would simply disappear and forget about them in the end. Dewey really doubted that such a creature as the one which was devouring the remains of his prey not too far from where he stood could ever forget his smell, but he was also aware that there was no way he could push himself to run flat-out now. Somewhere, deep in the boy's mind, he understood he was already doomed, but he also knew that you had to be unbelievably courageous to escape at the right moment and walk away into the night when your legs were shaking and you were not really strong enough to properly control yourself under such terrible circumstances.

Silently cursing his foolishness, Dewey kept watching the bloody feeding frenzy of the creature that was draining its prey's life in that

shadowy corner. The boy simply feared the moment when the beast would leave the poor corpse of its previous target and would turn his attention to the next, living succulent body nearby, which was indeed himself! He was certain that the mastiff had no intention of letting him go, of course, why should it do so, after all? Would Dewey himself leave the remains of a main course if he was still hungry? Would he ever put aside a glass of water if he was still thirsty? Clearly, not at all!

While the boy shivered asking himself what part of his body that monster would attack first -- his legs or his arm -- a lot of different thoughts crossed his mind as he believed those were the last moments of his young life. But it was what happened in the end, even though incredible and unexplainable, that left him speechless.

The gwyllgi -- but was it really such a fabled creature? –- raised his muzzle, then turned those blazing eyes to the boy and emitted its frightful breath, but didn't move on, nor did it began to head for him. The mastiff simply stood still, its paws and teeth still full of the blood of the animal eaten, as far as he could see, and it looked at him without doing anything.

Dewey didn't know exactly whom he had to thank or what unearthly help he had been deeply asking for previously had finally come to save him that night. Despite his present bewilderment and the fear he still felt inside, the boy forced his legs to walk on again and he left that place. Probably he had lost forever those two ewes, but he had incredibly escaped the cruel destiny that seemed to be waiting for him in the darkness at the end of that day.

***

Later on, after covering the entire remaining distance that separated him from his farm in the outskirts of the village of Efailwen, the boy approached their stable next to a poor whitish building, and he entered his home. Going past the massive worn out table that stood in the middle of the entrance, Dewey headed in silence for his bedroom where his younger brother presumably was already asleep by now. But he didn't get too far, as he noticed a figure sitting on an old wooden chair next to the fireplace, with characteristic graying hair outlining his rough traits, and he immediately darkened because he knew he had been discovered by Iwan. The man wore his usual leather homespun long-sleeved shirt and a woolen hat.

“Where have you been!” the grandfather thundered in an upset tone that bellowed across the wide room. Even the long shelf full of vases over the hearth, in which the vivid fire itself was, seemed to tremble because of his words. ”I was very worried, and I didn’t know where you had gone…”

Dewey completely stopped his pace, turned to the man and then lowered his eyes. “I lost two sheep of ours, I’m so sorry…”

“And you went outside at dusk! I told you that it could be dangerous in the moorland after the sun sets, but you didn’t listen to my warning! What should I do with you now?” There was a brief silence, and then the attentive dark-chestnut pupils of the old grandparent pointed to the small boy. “*Are you alright*?”

Dewey was very uncertain about what to say, but a short glance at the man’s face just made him surrender, as his look seemed to be able to pierce into his own mind. And so he confessed what had truly happened that night. When the nephew had completed the narration, he was waiting for Iwan to beat him hard because he had failed to follow the man’s clear orders. As it usually happened under such circumstances, this was not the only time he had disobeyed, unfortunately. So he waited for his beating for the loss of two ewes, but it didn’t go that way. In fact, Iwan’s features looked very surprised and almost comprehensive, at that point.

More than that, the eyes of his grandparent didn’t display hatred or resentment, but they seemed to be calm, even glad and warm in the end. Just as if such news had made him happy, in a way, but his reasons were completely unknown to Dewey anyway.

“You may not believe what I told you, grandfather, but things really went that way. It is a fact that such a small prey, that animal, appeared suddenly as if coming out of nothing that distracted the terrible chasing monster and saved me. I thought it was a hare at first, and then I understood it was different, but I couldn’t say what, exactly, as I didn’t remain there long enough to have a clear look at it.”

“No, things didn’t go just the way you think, my boy. Actually it was the one that you call a monster that saved you from the second smaller creature…”

“*What*?” Dewey cried out in bewilderment immediately.

“Listen to me, my boy…” the old man said. “Let me tell you a story, something that you don’t know, for sure.”

The boy looked doubtful, but his behavior openly displayed that he was fully awaiting the graying grandparent's words.

"What you thought was following you really was a gwyllgi, that's correct. I'm speaking of a mastiff with a powerful breath and blazing eyes. Many also call him 'The Dog of Real Darkness' - and you must have already heard about it. People are afraid of stumbling into him especially while walking along lonely roads at night. In reality, such creatures do a great favor for young people like you, as they simply hunt and eat some more insidious though smaller creatures, just like the one that you saw in the darkness and was caught by the gwyllgi in the end. It resembles a sort of dog, though a large one, but for all the experienced men like me there is no way such an otherworldly being could ever be mistaken for a common dog, of course. I have no doubt, from the description you told me before, that you encountered exactly that creature and not another wild animal, surely. There is a distinct glow to them, variously indicated in the legends as being like stars or coals aflame. Once they were spread throughout Wales, even though nowadays they remain mostly in the southern counties, anyway. The area where they live depends on what they usually feed on."

"That being…?" the boy asked the man, his voice was uncertain now.

"*Coblynau!*" the other replied in a plain tone. "They are mythical small creatures of about a foot and a half that are said to be living in the lost mines and ancient quarries of Wales. Moreover, those work constantly but never complete their task, and are reputed to cause landslides. One of those creatures doesn't look too different from a sort of fabled Goblin, actually…"

Dewey didn't know what he could say, because all that seemed to be incredibly strange, after all.

"They come out of some holes in the ground where they stay, secluded and afar from the light of the sun over the course of most of the day, as it is deadly to them all. *Coblynau* saw their old lands invaded by humans, whether they were the few people that lived in small groups in villages in these British Isles or the others that came from the other shore of the sea centuries ago to conquer and rule over these places." The old man continued while the fireplace kept crackling in the dimness of the room. "Since then, their long period of always being in hiding has begun, except in the most lonely areas, next to the mines and many ravines deep in the

ground they lived in. And they move away from those safe places only at night, when they come out to hunt people and feed obviously, because they mostly kill and eat younglings like you…"

"I see…So these fabled beings are true, and you know their true story…"

"No less than the gwyllgi are true. All of the old men like me living in this part of the country are aware of it, but we don't usually talk to our young nephews and sons about this…You can easily imagine why."

"I would never believe in your tales if I hadn't seen one of those small creatures for myself, for sure."

"Now you know that such tales are true, anyway."

"Yes, grandfather! But, I mean, why did the gwyllgi protect me? Why didn't he eat me, after eating that prey?"

"Well, there are too many dire tales about the gwyllgi. You must know that there is also a story about such a mastiff being spotted near a village inland many years ago, shortly before that built-up area suffered a mining disaster. Actually, it was not the gwyllgi that caused all that, but the many *Coblynau* living in the holes in the ground there that made the rocks suddenly fall. Those small beings did that in order to close the site down and protect the entrance from such creatures that could otherwise discover their many hiding spots built in that area."

"I can't imagine that…"

"What do you say now, my boy?" the grandfather asked him in the end.

"Well, I don't know…" Dewey said**,** looking surprised. "I thought you were really upset about the loss of the two sheep of ours, so I went outside to look for them. I was afraid of your possible reaction when I came back, but I was sure that such ewes were very important, the same as the rest of our small herd. What you revealed to me is extraordinary, and now I see that you are calm and peaceful."

"My boy, you didn't respect my orders, anyway…" the old man said. "We will start searching for those sheep tomorrow morning, don't worry… but what I care about most of all is that I still have my nephew alive and no bloody creature harmed you!"

Dewey smiled, pleased at those words, clearly.

"And now, go to your room and get some sleep. You had a night full of difficulties and fear, it's time to have a break, don't you think so?"

“Yes, grandfather, sure thing!” the boy immediately replied to Iwan. Then the man put his hand on the younger’s shoulders and accompanied him to his bedroom.

When he closed the door, the grandparent went back to the fireplace and sat again. He didn’t think it was the right time to explain to his nephew the whole truth, not yet. After all, it was his grandfather that had raised and trained that cub, a small ‘Dog of the Real Darkness’ more than 60 years ago, that he had found in a meadow along a waterway. The man had instructed the unearthly animal to watch over him when he was still 6-years-old and was starting to look after their herd at the farm. Obviously, he didn’t want to become a prey to the cruel *Coblynau* living in the ravines, hidden in the ground, or in the lost ancient mines in the area. So that mastiff had been taking care of Iwan while he grew up, and then he looked after his son, too, and so on, until today.

Of course, the existence of such a creature, that many feared -- but that their family could completely rely upon -- had to be kept in secrecy, because no one else would comprehend or appreciate their behavior, probably. Clearly, nothing could be revealed to their boys and the younglings until the right moment came, which was when they were adults and had to be informed that there was a fabled powerful gwyllgi that had taken care of their safety since they were children. Until that day, the sons and the daughters in their family had to fear the night and the darkness with all the terrible creatures living in it and remain at home after the sun set. But that was just to keep them away from other more insidious creatures, the *Coblynau* themselves, that were the real danger lying around.

In a way, it was strange to think of the fact that the fabled dog had its coat entirely hued in black, the same as the obscurity that the whole night was made up of. But there was nothing safer for all of them, because that creature was a sort of clearer spot of color, a great helpful mastiff lying somewhere in the moorland, surrounded by the insidious darkness that was full of incredible bloody beings living underground: those were the only ones they all had to really fear! *Not all the shades of black were the same in the dead of the night, of course…*

The old grandfather remembered what he had been told some weeks ago by a learned man in the village: there were about 7,500 words in the 1536 ‘Act of Union’, of which 150 dealt with the Welsh language. From that moment on, English, too, was to be the only language used in the courts

of Wales, and those using Welsh were not to be eligible for public office in the territories of the King of England. But in most of Wales and some areas along the border, the population had Welsh as their only language, of course. Anyway, it was said that the English authorities in no way sought the extinction of Welsh: what they truly wanted was uniform administration, and implicit in that was the creation of a Welsh ruling class fluent in English, even though no one at that time might know how many centuries had to pass before English wholly ousted Welsh from the homes of the landowners.

Iwan had a big laugh and thought that, maybe, the Englishmen would be able to replace their language in the end, but for sure nobody would be capable of making them all forget their own fables and the old tales spread everywhere in the country. Those, along with the legendary creatures that lived in them and resided throughout the whole of Wales, would keep living and remain on the earth for longer than the humans themselves, he was sure of it.

House on the West Strand

Gary Murphy

The shipping port of Whitehaven had thrived and was once home to the 3rd biggest shipbuilding industry in the whole of England. One of many claims to fame of course was the infamous John Paul Jones incident, attacking the harbour and spiking the canons, etc…

Nothing spectacular…

Whitehaven had been one of the most celebrated and popular hives for pirates, cutthroats, thieves, smugglers, the slave trade and kidnapping in the very early days, when troublemakers would come ashore and venture into town when after brief spells of raping and fighting, settled down into a drunken slumber. It certainly harbors a vast, diverse and exciting history.

Curwen Graham was obsessed with the house on the West Strand overlooking the harbor itself. Now, he stood mere feet from its entrance. A view that he saw looked out at the mostly choppy Irish Sea, and he paused to ponder ancient times and ritual.

He had never ventured into the house. The house once occupied by Irishman Jonathan Swift, who as a boy between traveling backwards and forwards between Whitehaven and Dublin, had looked down from the house on the West Strand and watched the 'little people' walking about, and imagined Lilliput and the classic tome Gulliver's Travels.

The house scared Curwen and sent a shiver down his spine each time he passed by it, which was usually when he was walking from Green Beck into the town to purchase drugs and cans of alcohol. But in his drunkenness, he strongly fancied exploring the interior of this old disused shitty little hovel, which by now had been boarded-up and burnt-out. He considered examining this greying and dilapidated slice of historical and cultural importance. Leaving his house in Green Beck, he passed the house on his journeys and always stopped to look it over. It forever emanated a black cloud of foreboding, and just why the Council let it stand and rot for so long would remain a mystery. After all, shortly after leaving for good, the imaginer of Lilliput was forgotten, and wasn't that strange? For a while, Whitehaven had collared Jonathan Swift for one of their own and one of their town's favorite sons…

Curwen was 55-years-old, single and living alone on a council estate, and a hopeless drinker and addict who relied on tax-payers money in the shape of state benefits, which for the better part got wasted on supporting his morbid habits and addictions. Once married and happy, he was now long-since divorced and cut the thin emaciated figure of a hapless loner and a loser, who mostly spent his daytime hours indoors watching TV and listening to his favorite 60s vinyl records. It was a sad life to endure as the days rolled on and on. But give old Curwen a bottle of Carlsberg, a Gene Pitney record and a joint…and he was one satisfied customer. Another of Whitehaven's favorite sons…

Tonight the Swift house appeared no different from last night or the night before that. He could hardly believe he had lived in Whitehaven this long and never ventured beyond that soot-caked doorway, where inside he would probably find strewn a great number of syringes, beer cans, and cast-off plastic bags that were concocted for glue-sniffing.

It beckoned him inside, this cold grey shack. It was a crooked and skeletally thin index finger signaling for him to enter. Suddenly one challenge Curwen felt more than willing and able to carry through right to the very end…

…But at what price?

He lifted the bottled lager to his lips and drank the biting goodness it proffered.

'Just a house,' he told himself and laughed, adding, 'That's all, just a dumb little house.'

It was like he was desperately trying to convince himself that the old dilapidated place was completely harmless and incapable of causing damage, either psychologically or physically, whether he was to step inside and sample the shelter, or just walk away and enjoy another night indoors drinking, smoking, watching TV and listening to dulcet-toned, legendary Gene sing. Either way was good for Curwen Graham.

Stepping onto the front porch he paused and reconsidered, stopping to glance behind at the Irish Sea, as if perhaps for the final time.

And before entering through the arch completely, he leant down and placed his half-empty bottle on the step. He thought it might be insulting to enter such a historical setting carrying alcohol. This would have to be clean and respectful, in every sense. The house had an air of majesty that he

didn't wish to disrupt or undermine, as he entered through its tall marble-arched doorway. The spirit of the house had to be honored and respected.

This evening the glow from the Moon was light enough. As Curwen made his way into the main living quarters, he stopped and grimaced at the sight presented before him. As expected, the usual bloodied and dirty syringes, empty crumpled beer cans, and of course, the strewn glue-bags everywhere.

Someone had possibly lived here, but maybe moved out in the Seventies, for the dirty, peeling wallpaper reflected that, and even the soggy Paisley carpet was of that time, too. No furniture, however, just a shitty, empty little space which was occupied each and every night by addicts, boozers and prostitutes fetching back their night's work for a sheltered quickie.

Curwen winced as he stepped in a puddle of stew-like cat's vomit.

He muttered, 'What the hell has that thing eaten?'

Then something strange happened which made him pause fearfully and make his entrance instantly regrettable. It was enough to make a lesser person turn-about-face and scarper, but not Curwen, who possessed a curious and sometimes fearless and fortuitous attitude. He would brave this one out…

He hissed, 'Who is it?'

Wherever the voice came from it seemed from upstairs, and it definitely said his name. He might have been more nervous had it not been a female voice. The ghostly ethereal sound immediately affected the workings of his bowels and he couldn't help but issue a long damp fart.

'Phew, that stinks…' he said in a whisper.

Behind his round-rimmed spectacles his eyes widened and his lower-lip quivered.

'I know you're there…' he said nervously, '…And I know you know I'm here.'

He seriously wanted to get the hell out, and get the hell out quick. Ghosts, apparitions, phantoms, poltergeists…not his bag, man. But curiosity drew him into the lobby to the foot of the hollow staircase and it was stubborn curiosity that convinced him there would be no danger in ascending the perilous steps to the very top. Curwen had the pathetically stupid idea there was a beautiful supermodel waiting there, blond-haired with long flowing locks, and big-breasted, reclined on a silken-sheet

mattress with her legs open-wide and inviting. She would take his hand and lead him directly towards a furious and passionate feeling of ecstasy. Romantic and dramatic fool…

The tall looming figure of a gentleman was outstanding in the bedroom and seemed to just scrutinize the evening view of the Irish Sea from the widow. He had his back to Curwen but almost certainly knew he was there, and when he turned, Curwen's mouth fell open with horror, for what stood before him was Jonathan Swift, rotten and decayed with eyes black, ghastly and bloodshot. He held a severed hand and chewed on one of the bloody stumps that were fingers.

'So nice to have you, Curwen,' the corpse-like Swift said, 'And please, won't you have a piece of Charlotte…'

The dumbstruck, petrified addict looked over at the bed to where the gentlemanly corpse indicated. Curwen's eyes were not that clever, and because it was night and with only the Full Moon for illumination, he was forced to squint. He breathed in short rasps, his lungs seemingly ready to fold and collapse.

On the bed was the mutilated, unrecognizable form of a woman Swift had cannibalized. Grotesquely tattered and shredded of flesh, limbs a-miss and severely bisected facially as well as physically. She was a horror…

…She was obviously Charlotte.

The putrid stink of death pervaded the frightened Curwen's nostrils and he backed up, not wanting to see anymore, as he retreated out onto the landing behind, and half-tumbled, half-stumbled down the stairs, screaming and crying; mostly screaming and crying for what remained of his tattered sanity, and secondly his physical well-being, as well as his personal safety. Fuck this for a game of soldiers, he thought. Jonathan Swift was a zombie…

Yet the travesty was far from finished.

'…What the hell…?' Curwen muttered. He stopped in the living room before going through the door back into the cold and chilly Whitehaven night. A misty fog had drifted in from the sea and a sign of rain in the atmosphere.

An array of corpse-like aristocratic guests sat loosely around a long oval mahogany table eating, drinking and making merry. Neither had a tooth between them and hardly a strip of flesh covered their bones. But they spoke in a posh upper-class accent and the laughter and excitement was

delightfully deadpan, even madcap, and somewhat bizarrely exaggerated. And at one side of the room, well and expensively attired maidens and their beaus danced, as they pranced and shimmied to the piano music supplied by a man in the corner, who also sang and sounded vaguely Irish. Curwen gasped as the room came to a sudden standstill and every figure in the deathly place centered their focus of vision on him. He wanted to apologize but couldn't find it in himself to do so. Instead, he would rather run, and keep on running. Never stopping…

For some reason he ran all the way and did not stop until he reached Whitehaven town centre, when he entered the church building on Lowther Street and approached the alter. Here, he had been a member of the choir in his youth and often popped in when troubled as an adult. He always found great solace here and sometimes felt like a minor blessing was bestowed upon him whenever he visited. Now, as he looked up at its high beams and colorful stained-glass pictorial windows, he broke down and wept, and even begged and prayed to be free of the memory of what he had just been privy to in the house on the West Strand.

'Please, I beg, I will never touch the drink again. I will live a good honest life. I will devote my life to the church, I promise. Just please, I beg, banish all thoughts of these demons from my mind…'

It seemed like a warm gentle hand rested on his bowed head. A feeling of grace swept through Curwen's old riddled bones. He tearfully squinted upwards as if to see the Lord. But the Lord was elusive…

And, it can be said, a drop of hard booze never passed beyond his lips again from that day forward.

And Curwen Graham continued to live at Green Beck until his dying day and passed the old dilapidated house on the West Strand many times. Sober and drug-free he was often tempted to enter its burnt-out, stained door-arch, but thought better of it each time. Whatever or whoever he saw that evening years ago he had seen for a reason, either as a warning to curb his curiosity, and not pry in other's affairs, however ancient, or because it was the wake-up call a man dying through drink and drugs so desperately needed. He needed that kick up the arse. Perhaps for him it had been a matter of life or death. But one thing he often pondered over and something he doubted very much that was ever true. Was Jonathan Swift a cannibal, perhaps? Certainly never…

High Tide Coming

Ken Goldman

Long Beach Island, Late Summer 1975

Leah could watch the undulating Atlantic for hours. In the distance the white caps danced, rolling slopes that pressed toward the shore and just kept coming. Throughout the summer the young girl stood hypnotized by the sea's ever-changing motion as if it were some moody living thing. A child with imagination, she would have sworn sometimes the ocean called to her. But she was much too smart to tell anyone.

Tonight Leah could not resist the temptation to answer, although the beach lost its friendliness once the sun descended. She removed her sandals and, looking over her shoulder, crept off the screened patio while her parents entertained their dinner guests. He ran towards the surf the moment her bare feet touched sand. Its coolness at first startled her because she had been used to sand baked by the sun, but the unfamiliar sensation did not slow her pace.

Small for her nine years, Leah seemed so much smaller compared to the vast Atlantic. She paused to sniff the salty air and watch the ocean swell. Twinkling beneath the beacon of a full moon, each breaking wave offered a new invitation. At the shoreline the surf crashed in a crescendo, then hissed softly as it withdrew from the beach. Leah loved the sea's smells and sounds.

Ordinarily she would never consider going into the surf without her father by her side, but Leah felt emboldened by the cover of night. The water's coldness tickled her toes and she had to suppress giggles, although

her parents' summer cottage sat a long way up the beach, appearing as a shadow from where she stood. It seemed unlikely anyone could see or hear her. To Leah this was a good thing.

She didn't want to anger her father by returning to the cottage dripping wet. Slipping out of her shorts and tank top, she tossed clothing behind her as she waded into the ocean's black ink. She didn't care that the water was so cold. Nothing in the whole world could beat this feeling. Leah ventured a few more steps until the water lapped at her waist.

Tickled, she laughed full out now. She couldn't help it. The dark water called to her more loudly than before. With awkward movements that seemed neither wading nor running she pressed forward with more confidence than she had ever felt, her I-love-summer-vacation smile still in place.

"Oh . . .! "

The Atlantic aborted the girl's utterance, and she suddenly plunged into a liquid hollow. For a few awful moments Leah panic-thrashed wildly. She managed to reclaim the surface, bobbing amid the waves like some discarded water toy. Salt water filled her mouth and stung her eyes. Gagging, she spat out as much as she could. Her toes located a squishy bottom, but just barely because the surf was nose high now. Leah tried to pull her thoughts together and realized she no longer could determine which way led back to shore, nor could she empty her mouth to call for help. She could only cough sea water before the rumbling surf pelted her again.

Walloped almost into insensibility she clawed her way to the surface in time to see the biggest wave in the history of the world. It grew higher as she stared, beading in on the girl like some murky creature nourished by the darkness. Leah found enough wind to gasp, then gagged as her lungs sloshed with salt water.

The roaring surf sounded like some enraged animal.

["I've got you now, girl . . . Oh, yes, little Leah, I've got you good."]

The wall of sea water hovered, pausing for a millisecond before it claimed her. It crashed upon her skull, inverting head with toes and flooding the world, spiraling her downdowndown to the bubbling darkness below.

["Got you, little girl . . . Got you . . ."]

Long Beach Island, Summer 2003

The weekly ritual began as it always did.

"Miss Sanders? I have your groceries."

Inside her beach cottage the woman stood motionless, rigid against her front door as she tried to control the runaway speedboat inside her chest. She leaned against the entrance as if blocking some unseen force on the other side. Although Walter's voice was familiar she could not bring herself to swing the door open for him.

Another few knocks, more insistent.

"Miss Sanders . . .?"

It took her best effort for the woman's breathing to return to normal, or to something close to normal. Without releasing the chain lock she opened the door part way, passing a five dollar bill to the boy. She could see only the kid's knuckles as he accepted her gratuity through the aperture, mumbling something she couldn't hear clearly.

"Thank you, Walter. You can just leave the bags on the patio for me." The kid added no further response, having grown used to the drill. Leah waited until she felt certain the young man had disappeared down the walkway. Crouching with her back against the door gave her the appearance of a woman much older than she really was.

"I can do this," she muttered to no one. "Damn it. There's nothing to it. I can do this." She released the chain and cracked the door wide enough to see the two bags. They were just out of arm's reach; she would have to step onto the patio to retrieve them. A gust of wind tousled her hair, and Leah almost slammed the door shut as if she had been touched by some filthy thing. Her heart's wild race began again, and the woman felt perspiration bead her forehead.

"Shit . . . shitshitshit."

In one motion she swooped the grocery bags into her arms and returned inside, snapping the lock shut. It would be all right now, she assured herself. She managed a self-satisfied half grin before unpacking her delivery and preparing a fresh pot of coffee. Although it was shaping up to be a lovely summer's day, this didn't concern Leah, although a dim memory stirred of a time when she enjoyed the sun's warmth on her face and the wind in her hair. That time seemed a hundred years ago because the ocean was always right there waiting.

["Daddy, no. Please, Daddy!"

“Lee, it’s only up to your ankles, honey. You used to love going into the ocean with me. Come on, just a little bit more--"

“No! No! Daddy, I don’t want to! I don’t--!“]

Leah snapped on the radio hoping for some easy listening, but she got the weather report. High tide was due around 11:30 a.m. today. During hurricane season, if a storm were kicking up, the tides threatened the cottages along the beach with flooding. But this was still July. Even so, the woman's hand shook as she she sipped her coffee.

She flipped through the pages of House and Garden. The photos inside the magazine were the only evidence of a garden around this house. Leah’s back yard had gone brown under the summer sun and had seen only weeds since her parents had died. She had loved the beauty and color of her mother’s flower garden in this yard, but some things couldn’t be helped.

High tide was coming at 11:30.

The thought stayed with her.

From the kitchen window the Atlantic glittered. The surf seemed unusually strong, and the young surfers and swimmers were already out. Leah had abandoned any idea of joining the bathers. Agoraphobia, one therapist had labeled her fears; panic disorder, said another. Like the weeds that had eventually strangled the last of her mother’s azaleas, fear worked icy fingers around her throat whenever she ventured beyond the cottage door.

High tide. 11:30.

Her heart raced and she was sweating. This was a silly and irrational reaction, and the clear thinking part of her knew this. The ocean was out there and she was safe, sheltered inside a familiar home. Her parents’ beach cottage provided the last remaining portal to the woman’s girlhood pleasures, memories of cherry popsicles shared with her father and of castles they built together in the sand. More than one therapist had assured Leah that living close to the water was the only way to confront her anxiety while reviving some of her more positive memories. But with each new sunrise pleasant remembrances seemed to slip further into a dark antechamber inside her.

She tossed the magazine onto the end table near her assortment of benzodiazepines. Already the day’s first migraine had kicked in and she was in no mood for another panic attack. Rifling through the pill bottles she selected two capsules, some extra strength Tylenol followed by a Xanax

chaser. She swallowed both with what remained of her coffee. Lifting her feet upon the small divan and closing her eyes, Leah waited for her meds to do their thing. Sleep came quickly.

So did the dream.

. . . the surf, like the roar of some enraged animal. So cold in the moonlight.

[“Got you now, little girl. Got you good."]

“No . . . No . . .“

She is going under for a third time. Like the older kids on the beach have told her, you get only three chances before you go down for good. Three strikes and you’re out because the third time, that’s the charm. One for the Father, one for the son, and one for the holy ghost. Hail Mary, full of grace.

[“Yes, little Leah. Oh, yes.”]

Something cold touches the pad of her foot, something slimy and fish-like. Icy fingers lock around her ankle. They yank at her and will not let go. She is too weak to resist.

Her chest has filled like some water balloon. She can’t breathe and soon her lungs will explode. She hasn’t any strength to fight her way back to the surface, let alone to shore. The beach seems a million miles away. The churning ocean is everywhere around her, swallowing the girl with a gaping maw that also is everywhere.

But there is something much worse.

Cold fingers are grabbing her ankle and then her thigh. Something is pulling her down, some finned creature twisting her into a forever hole that has no bottom. She has no struggle left in her. She knows she is drowning, but the sensation isn’t as she expects. It would feel almost soothing if it weren’t for those fingers that refuse to let her go.

And then something changes. The girl can’t quite make it out. Something is happening from deep within the abyss into which she sinks, a series of echoes reverberating beneath the waves. The vibrating ripples travel along her spine. The echoes become voices. Angry voices.

“Give her back!”

“Mine! Damn you, mine!”

The ocean churns, whipped into frenzied bubbles. Leah has the sensation of being lifted, scooped by something unseen and powerful, as if she is one of the small clumps of sand she has shoveled into her pail on the

beach. It occurs too quickly for her to understand exactly what is happening.

The girl finds herself returned to the shore spitting up sea water. Her hair is sopping and she has no strength to do anything more than lie there while the ocean is nibbling at her toes.

Something touches her foot . . .

Leah awoke. Something wet and fish-like brushed her ankle. Then it was gone.

“What the - -?”

She had been in a thick sleep for maybe an hour, enough time for the anti-depressant to play booga-booga with her head. The sound of sloshing water returned her to reality, but the accompanying image did not immediately register. A rush of sea water aped along the hard wood floor and had reached the couch where she lay. The entire room had flooded and water was still pouring in, tiny breakers pounding against the walls. The Atlantic Ocean had come through her door to say howdy.

Leah couldn’t recall any tidal warnings having been mentioned on the radio, nor flood warnings in any recent forecasts. But that was irrelevant since the water was there and it was just going to get deeper the longer she waited. If she acted quickly, acted before a full throttled terror kicked in . . .

She removed her sandals, preparing to slog towards the bay window to have a closer look outside but stopped herself cold before her foot touched the floor.

No. Can’t do that.

'It’s summa-time, summa-time, sum sum summa-time---’

The radio had remained on even while it floated past her. Leah remembered the large Sony that she kept in the corner was battery operated. But the electrical outlet to the TV. was already submerged, and she turned to see if the lamps’ outlets were also under water. They were. It would be a bad idea to chance sloshing around if the power were on, but she had no way of telling. Leah wasn’t about to try any of the switches to discover what remained working. For now she would have to stay put, a crouching prisoner confined to her own couch.

'It’s time to head straight for the mills,
it’s time to laugh and have some thrills . . .’

From her window she saw the surfers were still out there. She craned her neck, noticing the beach had not been significantly overtaken by the tide. But water was still rushing inside the family room and it had to be coming from somewhere. Once her father had mentioned how the ocean could seep into beach cottages from below the homes' structure, at least into those houses that had not been built upon stilt pilings. The Atlantic's ability to do that had given Leah nightmares. But how could the sea water be pouring in so damned fast? Already it looked to be a few inches deep.

The water burped.

There were ripples near the divan where the water bubbled as if something very large lurked beneath the surface. Leah's imagination conjured some awful gilled creature, but she had taken medication and realized maybe she didn't really see anything at all. More likely, it could have been some hapless jelly fish carried along for the ride. She waited but saw nothing more, clinging to the divan as if to a life raft. Remembering the relaxation exercises learned during one long ago therapy session, Leah took a moment for some controlled breathing. When a semblance of rational thinking returned she reached for the phone on the end table, trying to keep her hand steady as she dialed 911.

"Hello? Hello?"

There was no dial tone. There wasn't anything. After a minute she returned the receiver to its cradle. Her watch read 11:15, and Leah didn't feel like waiting until the rising tide forced her decision. Only one alternative remained, although the thought terrified her. Leah's mouth had gone dry and she felt uncertain she was up for this. She shouted anyway.

"Help! Can anyone help me?" She received no response. Trying to keep the panic from choking her she cranked it up a few decibels. *"I'm trapped in here! Can someone help me? Please?"*

Another burp, louder than the first, and a dozen expanding concentric circles worked their way outwards around the small cottage's family room. Something ***was*** in the water. An image forced itself into Leah's brain. A little girl, unable to breathe, was going downdowndown into a bottomless pit of water.

. . . because something was pulling her!

Leah's breaths came heavy and for a moment she thought she tasted sea water. She shouted again, kept shouting even while her throat burned.

There were many bathers just outside. Someone would hear her. Seen through the bay window, children splashed about with parents. Kids were playing water polo, and a teenaged boy held the waist of a young girl. But no one came.

In small waves the water inside the cottage kept rushing in and it was rising, permeating the cushions of the divan. Leah felt dampness soaking through her jeans.

"Help! Help me!" Her shouts were more urgent now, and when they became screams she didn't try to keep the accumulating panic from her voice. Still no one came.

Water submerged the cushion. Pulling her knees together like a frightened child, Leah perched in fetal position upon the couch's back support to avoid the murky liquid touching her. Leah's heart felt like it might escape her chest. Shaking with cold and terror, she gasped for breaths that wouldn't come. She imagined the worst.

Salt water filling my mouth, stinging my eyes. Gagging, spitting. If I try to escape now, if I have to go into that water . . .

Oh, fuck. Please, no panic attack. Not now. Please not now.

The water was rising, but more than that was happening. Trying to focus, Leah, searched for whatever level-headed thinking remained inside her. The water heaved and fell in advancing swells, breakers reduced to a miniature surf before her eyes.

Not now . . . not now . . .

(No, Daddy! I don't want to!)

Leah chewed her lip. No one was coming to rescue her and she couldn't save herself if she remained here frozen with fear. Once panic overtook her she knew it would never let her go. Closing her eyes she forced herself to lean forward.

"One . . . two . . ."

. . . third time's the charm.

She released her knees and stepped into the water.

The bottom fell out of the world. Downdowndown Leah fell into the blackness below.

"Got you now, little girl. You're mine, and I got you!"

Covered with slime the creature had been waiting like a patient lover. Claiming the prize, it held fast to the woman, disappearing with its catch into the dark water.

***

“Lee, it’s only up to your ankles, honey. You used to love going into the ocean with me. Come on, just a little bit more--”

“No! No! Daddy, I don’t want to! I don’t--!”

Leah stopped herself, suddenly aware of the child-like voice coming from her own mouth. She looked around. The familiar summer cottage sat just over her shoulder. She was on the beach with her father towering over her, the young and handsome man of her girlhood.

“Dad? You’re--”

[. . . alive?]

Her father smiled as only he could. Leah always loved the way he smiled. That was one memory she had never lost. She managed a smile too.

“Dad? You’re -- You’re sure it’ll be okay? You promise?”

He kissed her forehead. The familiar sensation almost made her cry.

“Have I ever lied to you, honey?” He squeezed her hand.

“No, Dad. You never did.” Her tiny hand squeezed his in return. “Let’s go for a swim.”

Together the two walked into the pounding surf.

***

Near the divan Leah Sanders lay face down on the floor in no more than two inches of water.

“Dead?” Officer Dickerson asked.

“Drowned, looks like,” his senior partner answered, letting go of the woman’s wrist. “Go figure. She could’ve waltzed out of here any time just getting her ankles wet. Stupid way to die.”

The younger cop turned towards the kitchen.

“Okay, so she pours some water and makes herself a pot of coffee, forgetting to turn off the faucet. Lounges here on her couch listening to music, drifts off to la-la land while the kitchen sink spills over and her floor floods.” He picked up the opened pill bottle. “Needed a little help nodding off, too.”

“Gilbert, you have a clear talent for grasping the obvious.” He lifted the woman’s dripping arm and checked her watch. It wasn’t waterproof. “Well we know she hit the water at 11:30 and stayed in it for three hours.”

“Could’ve been the drugs did it, Mike. Maybe she just rolled onto the floor and kept right on sleeping?”

Officer Michael Dubrowski shook his head. The woman would keep right on sleeping, all right. Knowing what had happened didn’t mean he had the slightest idea why it happened. But that was why God created coroners.

'It’s summa-time, summa-time, sum sum summa-time---’

Grimacing, the older cop pointed to the woman’s Sony still on the floor.

“Christ, Gil, turn that thing off, will you? I’ve always hated that song.”

Itch

Michael Porter

Mai Nagata absolutely hated camping. Almost has much as she hated her parents fixing her up with men they thought would be, "good for the family." For them, everything was about expanding the family wealth and maintaining honor via perfect integrity and honesty. Her life history of lying, drug and alcohol abuse, and pretty much treating everyone like dirt, didn't really fit with the family goals. At this point, she had pretty much resigned herself to the fact that her mom and dad were trying to dump her on some random jerk they could at least make a few bucks on. Tyler, though, seemed to be completely different. She didn't know what had shocked her more on the single's weekend run by her mother: the fact that she had been paired with an African American, or the fact that she believed she was actually falling in love with him.

"So, sweetie, are we going to hike or fish today?"

Mai smiled. "I've never been fishing before. Let's do that."

Ironically, they had to hike to the lake anyway, while hauling the fishing gear. Mai hated to think of what Tyler considered to be "just hiking". She was dead tired by the time they got set up at the lake. From there, he showed her how to use the fishing pole, how to put bait on the hook, and the signs to look for if a fish was taking the bait. After two hours, neither of them had caught anything, but she was having a good time anyway.

Rather abruptly, Mai screamed. "Ewww! What is that?"

It was the largest, blackest spider she had ever seen. It had also just crawled onto her leg. Rather effortlessly, Tyler picked the thing up by one of its legs and tossed it back in the lake. "That's a Fishing Spider, very common around lakes. There's nothing to worry about, except they are ugly as sin."

"I'm think I'm done for now. Let's head back to the camp."

That night they made what Tyler referred to as, "hobo dinners." Essentially, you loaded up a baked potato with everything in the book, wrapped it in tin foil, and cooked it over an open fire. Some of the other couples at the camp waved to them. Everyone was very polite.

The meal was very good, and they talked for a long time. Once it was late enough, they headed to different tents to go to sleep. There were strict rules after all, and she was dealing with her mother so...

Mai was having a really good time. She was asleep as soon as she got in the sleeping bag.

When she saw it was light outside, she knew she had overslept. That wasn't the only thing that woke her up, though. She had some sort of bug bite on her left hand. It was pretty small, but it really itched. She changed clothes, reapplied her bug spray, rubbed some anti-itch cream into the skin on her hand, and headed into the camp. Tyler was waiting for her.

"Hey sweetie, did you sleep well?"

"Pretty good. What did you have in mind for today?"

"I figured we'd have lunch with some of the other couples and then go for a short hike down to the lake. I'm getting a sense of what you like."

Mai had a few butterflies in her stomach. "I'm glad. I'm having a really good time."

"Good, I'm happy." Tyler paused for a moment. "Look, I know what you're parents think of me. Ultimately, I just want you to be happy. That's all I want."

She smiled. "I understand."

***

Breakfast consisted of fresh eggs cooked over an open fire, mixed with bacon and hash browns. Mai was in heaven sitting next to the man she loved, except her hand kept itching. Now there were three marks. Tyler took notice. "Hey, you'd better stop scratching that. It will only spread."

Mai shrugged. "I tried to treat it. It just keeps itching. I can't stand it."

Tyler giggled. "Are you done with breakfast? Come over here. I'll give it the special boyfriend treatment."

She laughed, knowing what he meant for the most part. "Ok, we can if you want."

They slipped into one of the tents and made out. Nothing too serious, though. After all, rules were rules. Mai found herself taking a nap. The itching woke her up sooner than she would have liked. Her hand was actually swelling now, with quite a few red bumps on it. Now her face

itched too. There were a few red bumps on her left cheek. She couldn't stop scratching. "You don't think I have the measles or something, do you?"

Tyler was busy applying cream to the bites and trying to get her to stop scratching. "I don't think so. You're not running a fever or anything. You've had chicken pox before, right?"

"Yes, but this is different..." She kept digging at her hands. The itching was becoming unbearable.

Tyler tried to get her to stop. "Mai, please stop scratching! Here, I'm going to wrap up your hand and put some more cream on your face. Let's just hang around camp today. Maybe I'll drive you home later."

"Ok. We'll see how I feel."

Having bandages on her hands made the itching ten times worse. She tried to focus on anything but the itching. She tried to make conversation, focus on Tyler, do anything but scratch. It was unbearable. She found herself rubbing her hands against the folding chair she was sitting in, rubbing her face on her shirt collar. She made it through most of the day. As evening approached and the sun started to set, she found an excuse to go to her tent. "I still don't feel very well. I think I'll get some extra sleep."

"Ok sweetie. I'll drive you home in the morning."

As soon as she zipped the tent shut she ripped the bandages off her hands like they were on fire. She scratched, and scratched, and scratched. The relief was so intense that she didn't even notice the drops of blood that were gently falling onto the tent floor. All she was interested in doing was scratching.

***

"Oh no, she's hurt herself. Let's get her in the ambulance."

Mai was really drowsy. She fought against the medics as they loaded her into the ambulance and strapped her down. Huge nail marks decorated her face and arms. The itching was returning. Now it had spread to her neck and feet. She couldn't get her hands free to scratch anymore. She screamed until one of the medics shot her up with something to knock her out.

Her last clear vision was of Tyler looking on in horror along with her mother and several of the other campers. The endless itching followed her into her drugged slumber, haunting her.

Once the drugs wore off, she found that she was in some type of medical facility. "Look, we have to clean these wounds. I can do that with her strapped to a bed. Take off the straps and get her into a bath tub. Medicate her if you need to. Afterwards, you can medicate her again in isolation. For now, just take care of her basic needs."

Four nurses untied her, helped her get her clothes off, and ushered her into a bathroom.

"There's soap, wash cloths, and towels available. We will give you some time and we'll be right outside if you need any assistance. Take your time. A nice hot bath is just what you need." The nurses left the room.

She smiled while they left. As soon as she was in the room alone, she couldn't stand the itching anymore. It was ten times worse than it had been. She knew that she wouldn't be leaving this place anytime soon. Finally, she dug the nails of her right hand as far as they would go into her left hand, and ripped all the skin off.

It was such a relief. No more skin, no more itching. However, what she saw in her arm informed her of her fate. Hundreds of eggs were hatching in the soft muscle tissue of her arm. And from those eggs, thousands of baby Fishing Spiders spread over her arm and mid-section.

Thousands more erupted from her face, her feet, everywhere. She managed one shrill scream of pain and terror before collapsing to the floor. In thirty seconds, she was dead. Nurses and doctors rushed in to find out what was going on. The sticky, black tide of growing black spiders washed over their flesh like a tidal wave.

***

General Nelson looked at the heads-up display over part of the area over and around the Beckley Treatment Center. "Ok Ota, what's the full measure of this situation?"

Dr. Shu Ota didn't pull any punches. "The international community has been warning you about this since Three Mile Island, since Chernobyl, those kids in Scotland. Every human body those spiders infect will produce about one hundred thousand spiders. Everybody that gets overcome will infect another hundred bodies, which will produce another hundred thousand spiders. We're quickly looking at the end of our race, unless we're willing to make sacrifices."

Nelson paused for a moment, looking over some files, and then slammed his fists into the table. "Damn it, how could it come to this??" He paused and looked around the room at the somber faces. No one wanted to look him in the eye. "Alright gentlemen, we all know what happens next. Dear God, help me, we're going to drop a sixty-megaton weapon on top of that area. Let this be a lesson to future generations of the failure of ours. May God have mercy on their souls, as well as our own."

***

Most of West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, had to be evacuated west. The event was blamed on multiple nuclear reactor meltdowns due to coordinated terrorist attacks. Luckily, the mutant spider infestation was wiped out. However, the after-effects of the radiation on cockroaches, rodents, and newborn humans in the western hemisphere could not be undone. A new day would be dawning soon……..

The Boogeyman'll Getcha!

Ran Cartwright

The Boogeyman'll getcha!

Those words had always been a closer for little Tommy Midland. Mom and Dad Midland had always used them, stopped Tommy in his tracks from committing any further childhood mischief and depredations. Straightened him right up and out. He'd stand there, forgetting to breath, eyes as big as dinner plates. He knew the Boogeyman had to be standing right there behind him, drooling and excited. Another neighborhood kid for the taking.

Yeah, the Boogeyman was real, alright. Jimmie Braxus had seen it. Then Jimmie's folks had moved away. Real quick. Said something about a new job for Jimmie's dad somewhere clear across the country. But all the kids in the neighborhood knew it was the Boogeyman. Jimmie's mom and dad had moved to keep the Boogeyman from getting Jimmie. Smart move.

Many a long night Tommy had hoped that his mom and dad would move too. But they wouldn't. And didn't. *The Boogeyman'll get me!* Tommy had pleaded. *You said so…*

You just behave and you won't have to worry about the Boogeyman, mom and dad had always said and smiled.

So, Tommy behaved. Terrified, but behaved.

Tommy grew into a fine understanding young man. He moved away, got educated, made a bundle. And came back to the old hood for remembrance. The old hood wasn't the same anymore. In fact, it was pretty much run down. Decayed. A lot of house boarded up. Houses that still had people, had people peeking out from behind curtains and drapes. Tommy's old family house was gone. Torn down. So was the house that Jimmie's family had lived in. The right side of the tracks had become the wrong side of the tracks. Way over on the wrong side.

Young professional and upward mobile Thomas Midland stood on a leaf littered sidewalk, hands shoved in the pockets of his London Fog overcoat, shaking his head at the decayed condition of the old hood. His eyes lingered for a moment on the bare knuckled branches reaching down from the slate gray sky. *Tree monsters*, the kids had called them in their youth. The air was chill. There was a slight breeze. Kicked up a small

cyclone of yellowed leaves and carried them down the street. Leftovers in the old hood stayed indoors, peeking from the shadows. Not a sign of them otherwise. Wouldn't have mattered. None of them would have recognized Tommy Midland now all grown up.

Then something moved, caught Tom's eye. He turned, thought he saw someone disappearing into the woods. The same woods behind the house where he had once lived. The same woods where the Boogeyman lurked, mom and dad had said all those years ago. The house was gone, but the woods were still there. Thicker, darker. Tree monsters. A great place to lurk, if one were so inclined, if one was the Boogeyman. Yeah, great place. Tree monsters… The Boogeyman.

Tom smiled and chuckled. Half heartedly. Something had moved. Something had darted into the woods…but…

"Hey!" Tom called out, raised a finger. "Wait!"

Silly, so silly. Tom had grown up. The Boogeyman was just a child's fable to keep children in line. Whatever…whoever had ducked into the woods, well, they were flesh and blood.

Tom hurried across the small vacant lot where the Midland family house had once been. He stopped at the edge of the woods, paused, and sighed. There was a sudden tap on his shoulder, made him nearly jump out of his shorts and shoes. He gasped, forgot to breathe, his eyes as big as dinner plates, and turned. A gnarled old crone stood there scowling at him. She had appeared out of nowhere like a ghost. *Mrs. Hamilton?*

"I wouldn't go in them woods if I were you," Mrs. Hamilton snarled, if it was Mrs. Hamilton. *The old bag!*

"Why?"

She grinned, said, "The Boogeyman'll getcha!" and cackled like an old witch.

"Nonsense," Tom dismissed her, and started into the woods.

The woods sighed, whispered a song through the boughs. It was a dark song that unconsciously drew Tom deeper and deeper. Strange indiscernible black shapes moved silently, closed in, reached. A clawing blackness. The air was heavy. Animals chattered and moved unseen in the underbrush. Birds cawed unseen in the branches. First few, then many. Tortured and twisted limbs became grotesque. They moved. Slowly. Or seemed to. Maybe it was Tom's imagination. And eyes peering at Tom. All

around were eyes. Red eyes and yellow eyes and white eyes. Beast eyes and human eyes.

Blinking.

Watching.

Squinting.

Leering.

The Boogeyman'll getcha, Tommy! A child's voice. Jimmie Braxus from long ago.

Tom turned. No Jimmie.

The Boogeyman'll getcha!

The Boogeyman'll getcha!

Two more familiar voices called. *Mom? Dad?*

Then a hand rested on Tom's shoulder. He gasped. Time stopped. He forgot to breath, his eyes were as big as dinner plates. He turned. Saw. And shrieked until his voice was gone as he spiraled into madness.

* * *

Weird things happened in institutions for the criminally insane. Strange stories always filtered out about loonies and what they see and hear and claim to know. Even stranger stories about what goes on behind closed doors. Some stories that no one wanted the general public to know mostly because there was no rational explanation.

Case in point was that of Thomas Midland, deceased. Carted out of his padded cell on a gurney after horrific screams and cackling laughter echoed from his cell and down the halls. The night attendants had rushed into the cell, found Midland dead. His body shredded. The cell was a mess. Blood splattered everywhere, padding torn as if by huge claws. And written in blood across a wall were the words: The Boogeyman'll Getcha!

Killer Salesman

R. A. Johns

Never take much notice of the paintings in hotels. Admit it, you don't either. Vulgar reproductions of minor works or childish daubs. But *that* one was different. Knew it soon as I saw it. Not *how* different.

Me? I'm the man you don't even notice or if you do it's out of the corner of your eye. Promoted but silently. Succeeding in the shadows. I slaughter your dreams with stealth. Always reckoned there was a bug whirring in my brain, burrowing its proboscis deep into whatever region controls ambition. And the price of failure..?

So I was driving down this narrow road in the deepening dusk, experiencing that sense of loneliness you get when you're heading not for home but a faceless hotel where no one knows or cares who you are. Everywhere around me appeared empty like places often do as autumn dies. Emaciated trees lined flat fields. There was a pale glow in the distance like fading lanterns coming from a solitary farmhouse far away over the fallow fields.

***

'I'm sorry but we're not prepared to change suppliers.' Mr. Kingsley, of Arnolds and Associates, tucking his shirt into his trousers with an exaggerated flourish as he'd waved me towards the door. 'But thank you for your time.'

'From paper clips to ink cartridges we're the cheapest around. If you switched to us you'd save--'

'We're happy with who we're with. They've been supplying us since my grandfather's time. There are more important things than money Mr. Needham.'

I'd stared at him blankly. He may as well have been spouting Ancient Elvin.

I'm a salesman you see, of office supplies. *Superior* office supplies. *From paper clips to ink cartridges we're the cheapest around*. Patter used to be we were *the best*. But you know what times are? I'd given the usual spiel, even thrown in some Needham special ingredients – the fairy dust - when he came over coy. But he hadn't signed. Why?

I'd stumbled from the grey chill of their reception, my palms sweating, samples heavy in the black suitcase clutched to my chest. I'd bag Kingsley. Skin him. Mount his head on my desk. Or it'd be my dick on the line.

***

I'm a killer salesman. Make deals. Close deals. Magic deals. Doubt. Can read it in your eyes. Is he hustling me? Don't pretend. I detest liars. Worse than bums…

Johnny could never catch a ball or climb a tree, fell over his feet when he walked as if there was an invisible tripwire hovering permanently in front of him. But he knew things. Like how to find porn. And how to complete every level on any computer game. More than this, where the Easter Eggs were hidden as if he had an extra sense which sniffed them out to make up for his lack of physical prowess. At school the teachers called us The Twins.

One night a gang of us had slept over. Like all kids the world over, we'd got our kicks trying to make the others blubber in terror with tales from the crypt. But to each one I simply shrugged. Johnny had punched my shoulder. 'Why you not..?'

'They're losers. Guys in those stories. Deserve what's coming to them.'

'So what scares you?'

I hadn't hesitated. 'Failure.'

***

Today's meeting was the same as a thousand others, bleeding together in a blur of PowerPoint presentations and pricings. I could do it on autopilot. But this in-between existence? Maybe I never click out of autopilot. Nothing's real on the road.

There's a sterile dislocation in the long drives down motorways when the only sound's the Honda's hum over uneven tarmac. And then? You know what it's like in those chain hotels? Impersonal. That too small kettle. Packets of bland instant coffee. And dry biscuits. If you're lucky. But the hotel I was traveling to now was different. No deal had been struck. Sealed.

Signed in blood – theirs or mine, I'm not choosey. So I had to stay another night. Brainstorm. Everywhere was booked but this one. A bed's a bed, right?

I pulled off the road. Punched in Thorwin's number.

'No sale?' His cold, precise voice transformed the question into a pronouncement of execution. I imagined him ranking up the paperclips on his desk like a firing squad.

'Not yet,' I qualified.

'That's pussy talk.'

'This is me. I'll seal it.'

Don't know who was less convinced. Him or me.

'See me on Monday. Reckon you've lost your balls.'

He slammed down the phone and I was left with his words echoing a death knell. My fingers crept to my crotch as if to check my bollocks were still attached. I stabbed in new numbers.

'Hello?'

It was only when Kingsley answered that I realized I'd no idea what I was going to say. 'It's Needham. Have you had a chance to..?'

'Did I not make myself clear?'

For the second time, the phone went dead on me.

***

Back on the road, I turned down a potholed dirt track towards the hotel, a stark finger with nothing but the wilderness of farmland behind.

I struggled out against the wind which caught at my coat, twisting it like a wagging tail. I reached onto the backseat for my bag and black briefcase, slamming the door with an angry finality. I waded through the light from the reception which flooded out into the inky evening in sticky pools and up to the counter.

'I booked a room?'

The teenager barely glanced at me as she checked the computer, drumming her witch like nails across the keys. 'Room fifteen.'

Then she slid the cardkey across to me her fish eyes flitting back to the screen of the portable telly perched under the counter. My wife dismisses me with the same glazed expression. You must get it too? As if we're faded to grey. Ghosts.

Fifteen? A good number. You know the way you always think a hotel's going to catch fire? Blazing inferno? It never occurs to you all those nights you snore like a baby in your bed at home. But when you leave the safety of your lair..? That's why I like to be on the ground floor, less chance of roasting like a kebab in your polyester duvet if the hotel explodes. But maybe I've just had more time to obsess?

As I trudged down the labyrinthine corridor, I was disgusted to note that the wallpaper was peeling. Infested with mould. The doors were dingy brown and faceless apart from one bulky, black number. What those doors hid were worlds in miniature, shutting the world out, shutting someone in. A thin wall between but each room a universe to itself.

And *that's* when I started to feel it - the pull of nausea and a sort of adrenalin fear which turns your mouth down at the corners. Threatens to make you piss your pants but somehow your bladder holds on because it's still only a *feeling.*

But that feeling's enough.

If I'm honest it wasn't the first time I'd felt the sensation gnawing at me. If I'm really honest (and truthfulness isn't something that gets you far in my line of business) I'd experienced it ever since I'd been thrown out of the meeting at Arnold's. When I'd failed to seal the deal which would have made Thorwin or *Steve* if you'd brought in the highest commission, remove the knife from my testicles. Then more as I'd driven away from their lofty, Edwardian building towards this hotel. You know that uncomfortable sense of déjà vu? Now? In this corridor? It was crescendoing into dry mouthed, eye widening…Yet it was also like coming back. A familiarity of home.

I noticed room number thirteen as I passed. Then fifteen. Here it was. I smothered what remained of the feeling like a nasty taste in the back of my mouth. I swiped my cardkey and shoved the door open.

Darkness. Just the outline of a bed and something on the wall above it. My eyes took a moment to adjust and in that moment I could swear I saw something *move*. I half expected a grizzly bear or wolf to launch itself out of the black and rip open my jugular. Does that sound like a sensible guy you'd buy office supplies from?

I inched my hand to the light switch. But I never took my gaze from the bed. Whatever was hunched in a dark mass on top of it. I flicked on the light in one jittery motion.

Nothing. A normal hotel room. Rundown but just standard, you know? Bathroom off to the left, double bed straight ahead where I'd seen its outline, tucked in with tight blood red covers like the swaddling of a dead baby. And yes, a large picture above on the wall but I didn't even look at that - I've already told you I never think much of hotel art. Remember? And be honest here too, would you have thought twice about it?

I shook my head at my unfounded fear, in the way people do who've gasped at the sound of a car backfiring or paled at unexpected turbulence. But residual unease lingered in the quick lizard licking of my dry lips.

I slung my bag and briefcase, containing my samples of *essential supplies for the modern office* to one side of the room and headed into the bathroom. There was relief in its clinical whiteness. I splashed cold water over my face, scrubbing my hands under the running tap. Don't you ever imagine just how many germs infest cardkeys? How many filthy hands it's passed between? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions?

When I strode back into the bedroom wondering whether I'd treat myself to room service, I stopped stock-still, flooded with a sudden, awful sense of being *watched.*

Instinctively, I glanced up. And found myself looking straight at the painting which hung directly above my bed. For a moment, it was only a dark blur, an indistinguishable smudge but when I took a step towards it, everything sharpened into focus. Paralyzed. I couldn't move. Something held me motionless. If I'd had control over my frozen limbs, I'd have bolted away from the picture. But I was now a statue.

An afternoon street in a town which could have been anywhere in England. Bright autumn sunlight drenching the scene in a cold web of thin yellow. Tall buildings and cars driving through the main road in the broad stroke background. But it was who or *what* was in the foreground crystal clear which caught at my mind.

A man. Dressed in a dark, pinstripe suit and bowler hat, a black briefcase, just like mine, clutched in his right hand. A businessman perhaps from the first half of the twentieth century. At least, I guessed it was a man but it was impossible to be sure because the figure faced away from any viewer as if it was walking away from you down the imaginary street. You could only see its powerful back and the sheen of its red hair under the darkness of its bowler hat.

And why am I telling you this? Hotel art right? Because this painting moved me. But in the disturbing way that seeing a man shake his baby daughter would. A power but not a good one. Once seen never forgotten.

You know what really unsettled me? That I couldn't see the face of the thing in the pinstriped suit and bowler hat. I took several deep breaths. Peered closer. No artist's signature but there was a title underneath - *The Salesman.*

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I forced myself to look away. My limbs were thawing. I dragged out my mobile, checking for signal coverage. It was weak but enough to make the call I always do as soon as I get into a hotel. The one to my Nicole. Not that she's the concerned type. But I am. Concerned about her. Concerned she's curled up with Justin or Dylan or any of the pretty boys she shares the emptiness of my house with. You'd think she'd be better at lying by now. Everybody lies. Your partner has at least two secrets from you right now. If you're lucky. It's about taking a grain of truth and building the lie around that. Authenticity of invention. But everyone has a 'tell'. Do you know what yours is? My wife wipes her fingers lightly across her mouth when she tells an untruth. Makes me want to kiss her.

But not when I can smell the other men on her. Smell them in my house, bed and on *me* too when I touch her. So now you're wondering why I stay with her? Don't reveal I know? Because I'm a salesman and I deal in lies. She thinks she's cuckolding me which gives her the illusion of control. I'm not going to destroy her fantasy. It makes her happy. Guilty. And that means a wife who'll never leave me.

Or that was the plan. Would she stay with me if I lost my identity on Monday? Became the failure?

'Hello?'

She was sleepy, this early in the evening? You know what that meant? She'd be wearing her flimsy pink negligee, the one I bought for our last wedding Anniversary which she'd insisted she'd adored but had never worn. At least, not for me. But what's the bet she was wearing it now? Pulling it around her naked body as if I could see her down the phone, which in my mind's eye, I could. Go ahead, you have my permission. Don't hold back. Dave or Paulo would be doing the same anyway, flaccid (in my

imagination, always flaccid not erect, a good tip for all husbands) cock swinging casually on my bedclothes.

'Hey sweetheart, just calling to say I got here fine. Everything's OK.'

'Sure? 'Cos your voice sounds kind of...'

Suddenly I realized it *was*. My tongue felt as if I'd been licking the backs of warty toads. I coughed, trying to sound more like myself again. Or the self I create for her. 'Got a cold coming.'

'You've anything to take?'

Was that real warmth? Deluded. You had to say it didn't you? OK, OK. But at that moment all alone in the coldness of the hotel room with that picture hanging above me? I heard warmth.

'All medicated up. You not too lonely?'

A pause. I imagined her turning her head, her blonde hair lightly touching the tops of her breasts in the movement, to smile at the lean body sprawled next to her. In our bed.

'I'll survive.'

There was a silence as there always is between us. A chasm so wide I can only see her outline. Am I ever more than a silhouette to her?

'Don't phone tomorrow,' she ended the conversation like a matron with no time to deal with a whingeing patient, 'I'll be out and I don't want to worry about bringing my mobile.'

'Talk in a couple of days then. Night, darling.'

'Hope you feel better tomorrow.'

I let the phone fall from my ear onto the bed. Maybe she should leave me. Maybe the charade wasn't worth the dance.

***

Being watched.

That feeling again. More pervasive this time. Overwhelming. I glanced back up at the painting, insidiously drawn to it. And thought I was going to vomit.

The picture had changed.

There was still the man or whatever it was in the bowler hat, clutching his briefcase and he still had his back to me. But the landscape around him, the road he was walking down, was different. It was the streets of the same unknown town but was no longer the central thoroughfare. Now it was a

side alley with one main Edwardian building. And what was worse? The scene was familiar to me.

It took a couple of seconds for my dazed mind to focus. To drag the knowledge out of my subconscious' filing cabinet.

Arnold's. The firm where earlier today I'd failed to sell our *superior office supplies*.

It couldn't be, could it? I'm the man no one sees coming. I couldn't be known. Followed. Foreseen. However the hell this was working. I was desperate to dash from the room but experienced that connection, you know the one like when a baby's born and parents say you don't know what it's like 'til it happens to you? That's what it was like. You won't understand it unless it happens to you. You hope it doesn't?

I steeled myself to scrutinize it. There. The company's name and logo at the top left hand corner of the canvas was smudged. I couldn't read it. Frustrated, I slammed off the bed. Was it the same? Could my tired mind have simply become confused? Maybe I really *was* ill, like I'd told Nicole. But I remembered how bright and clear the light had been in the painting before. Here it was dimmer as if it was later in the day.

I stumbled further from the bed, my legs unexpectedly weak. I'm not the type whose knees have ever buckled before. I groped back into the bathroom, staring at my reflection in the smeared mirror. It was white. Colorless. Like a corpse. My eyes didn't look like mine anymore, wild and frightened. My reflection was like a stranger standing on the other side of the glass copying my every move.

I twisted on the cold tap and dowsed my face. Its icy hit woke me up. I wrenched the towel, stiff with a thousand washes and imprints of other people's hands over myself, as I breathed hard. You ever tried to remain calm when you really need to remain calm?

Could it be stress? Yes, I heard you whisper it. He's cracking up. The fact I hadn't sealed the deal? Thorwin once narrated how one of his staff had suddenly cracked under the pressure to meet a month's target and that night had calmly gone home to his garage, stood on his briefcase still full of office samples and hung himself. I think he meant it as a warning - or incentive. I was never sure which.

But you've got me all wrong. I like stress, *thrive* on it. Stress equals adrenalin, equals fuel for the chase. The hunt. But what if you're right? And good stress has slowly corroded to bad? Has been devouring me? And was

now manifested in this hotel room? Maybe I too was only one step away from climbing onto my briefcase, noosing myself with my company tie and swinging from the light, my purple tongue sticking out between clenched teeth?

I dragged out my phone and waited, tapping my foot up and down with painful impatience. 'Mr. Kingsley, I don't want you to miss this opportunity--'

'*You* again?'

'If you'll only listen for one moment I promise--'

'Is there something wrong with you man? I'm not interested in your bloody paper clips,' Kingsley roared. 'Don't ring this number again.'

Then nothing. Nothing but my life bursting into red hot flames, consuming me to ashes. Stressed? Castrated. Cuckolded. Careerless. Fuck you. I was soaked through to the bones with it.

***

I edged out of the bathroom, keeping my eyes firmly on the fraying carpet and then shuffled to the foot of the bed.

An image of my wife flashed into my mind. The way her hair fell over one eye. Then how she'd toss her head without even thinking about it so she could see. That's what had first attracted me to her when I'd met her at a friend's party three years ago. What? You thought it was going to be her deep love of Proust?

When I raised my eyes to the painting I made a sound but not a gasp like you'd imagine. It was more of a strangled gulp. Because it'd changed again and this time there was no doubt.

The figure in the suit and hat was still there, his back perpetually to the viewer. But the picture was dark as if it was now night-time, not day like in the earlier two pictures. And this time I was certain I knew the location he was walking towards so purposefully. One building, tall against the backdrop of car park and fields. The only light was from the reception which spilled out in thick puddles into the night.

My hotel. *This* hotel. Its name was emblazoned in stark letters in the painting.

My skin crawled as if I was covered head to toe in beetles.

There was no way to slot this irrefutable evidence into my ordinary world of staplers and post-it notes, of the dislocation of driving on deserted dawn motorways and my wife at home without me. My brain held its breath and then imploded, shattering into slivers. I was a failure. Happy now? Stand shamed in a circle and announce it to the group first step in the healing process? I was the shadow and now I was being shadowed.

'What do you want?'

Silence. If there were other guests they were hermetically sealed in their own fantasies or nightmares.

I stumbled backwards from the painting, unable to take my eyes off it. Terrified of what would happen if I blinked and even for a nanosecond stopped watching it. Scared of how it'd change again.

I fell. Suddenly, painfully, backwards.

Dazed, I pushed myself back up onto my knees and realized I'd tripped over my own briefcase. I hurled it away, my fury at this inanimate object for a single moment grounding me. I scrambled back onto my feet. And the first thing I saw was the painting.

Only it'd changed again.

I was rooted to the spot, unable to let out the scream which was building up in me like boiling hot steam.

The bowlerhatted man was inside the building now. Inside the hotel. He was walking with his back to me as before. Moving down a corridor. It was dim and claustrophobic. The wallpaper dark in patches with mould. By his left shoulder in the foreground was a dark brown door and on it in a single block of black, the number...

I didn't want to read it but it was there, so clear and stark I had no choice -

Thirteen.

He was passing the door, just like I had. Passing it on his way to...

Suddenly, in front of my horrified eyes, the picture shimmered and trembled. The figure, that intent, efficient figure, with his suit, red hair, hat and briefcase remained exactly the same. His back to me. His face hidden. If he even *had* a face… But the rest of the painting around him was changing even as I watched and this time I knew it wasn't a trick of my mind, stressed or suicidal. It was cold, hard, fact. It was moving before my eyes like a million multi-colored darting ants, forming an entirely new picture which showed…

A door.

The figure standing in front of a door in a dim corridor. A large door, muddy brown, with a single black number on it.

The number *fifteen*.

My door.

A knock, as hard and insistent as it was confident.

A knock at my hotel room door. You know who it was. I did too.

The Salesman.

Pine Scented Ocean

John McCormack

Scraps was not a beautiful dog, instead, like me, he was unnoticed, but full of youthful energy. Each Saturday we ran through the pine forests to hide out at our secret place, a small pool fed by a sewage choked stream, where the light filtered through the spruce trees, and the only other animals were mosquitoes with pontoon legs that skated upon the scummy water. The water was dirty but I did not care since everyday television reporters showed pictures of the planet's water problems, including the fact that every spot of the sea floor was covered in garbage and every wave in the ocean propelled a collection of plastic rubbish.

Two years ago Scraps died of canine polio, first dragging his dead legs behind him, then becoming porch bound, unable to even crawl into the yard. My father took the dog to the woods and ended his suffering.

A year later I graduated from high school and, to end my suffering, my father got one of business buddies to give me a job at the Twenty Four Hour. By day I sell cigarettes, beer, and lottery tickets and by evening, I mop the linoleum floors, and stock the shelves with magazines, potato chips, and snack cakes. When midnight arrives, I walk to my apartment where I listen to music on my laptop and fall asleep.

The apartment complex does not allow pets and the neighborhood has no stands of trees or grassy fields, instead I am surrounded by grimy streets, and smoky factories. Now I spend Saturday mornings straightening up my apartment enough that I can stand to live in my two rooms. Even with only one occupant, the old plumbing does not work well. By Saturday morning, I am greeted by a lavatory bowl thick with dark brown water and earthy smells.

Last Saturday, I poured in the last residues of a bottle of cherry toilet cleaner and, for a moment, my bathroom was drenched in the sweet smell of red snow cones and summer popsicles. To finish filling up the bowl, I opened a new bottle of pine scented scrubbing solvent. I was unaware that at the bottom of the label of this organic compound was a warning. It stated that the contents should not be mixed with other products because its pine oil, bacteria- eating base components were factory- balanced for proper solid waste and vapor consumption. I emptied the bottle. My toilet

bubbled with effervescent action and then the mixture hardened into a scaly, yellowish, crust. I already missed the cheery scent, the pine coming across as metallic, not smelling like a northern forest but more like an industrial lab.

With this accomplished, I congratulate myself by stepping into the living room/ bedroom to let this churning layer steep, like leaving dirty dishes to soak. I power up the laptop and dance to the beat of thunderous rock songs, happy that I is sanitizing in such a painless way.

After seven and one half songs, I return to my bathroom. Inside my toilet, whipped into a dancing frenzy by my music, moves a liquid, pus colored form, gyrating to the rhythm like those children's toys at the mall.

"That's some funky moves for potty water," I said, thinking that some gurgling from deep within the plumbing was creating this fluid dancer. My words scare it and the thing jumps beneath the surface with a splash. "I guess I'd better get to scrubbing." I take the toilet brush, a circlet of hard, bristles and began damping it in the water. From the hardened surface, the liquid entity again pushes through, teasing with its motions. Having found me harmless, it wants to play. After a spirited game of chasing about the bowl, it begins to grow. As it adds size, the color of the water turns from brown to yellow, to completely transparent. "Good job, boy," I say to the new friend, who already is wilting, becoming smaller, less active.

"You're still hungry, aren't you?" I ask. I tell him that I know of sunlight pouring through a tree-lined stream. "You'll have to trust me," I say as I dig an old cooler out of my closet and dip it into the toilet. Sloshing my way through the neighborhood and across the fields took most of the afternoon. Finally, I introduce him to the creek and pour him into its filthy reservoir. It only takes a moment for him to begin absorbing the contents. As he grows larger, he changes from colorless, to yellow, to brown. Fully fed, we spend much of the next hour playing tag about the riverbank. When he begins to slow down, to shake, and become paler, I tell him that I'd hear that all streams eventually join up with a gigantic, polluted ocean. "It's bigger than I can even explain," I say. "It's dirtier than words can even describe. And it is filthy." I point downstream.

I still spend my time at the Twenty Four Hour. My hard work has earned me the title of night supervisor. Sometimes, when I get a break from selling beer, cigarettes, and coffee, I get a moment to turn on my laptop. I love blasting the store with rock music, but, now, I visit the news channels

and listen as the amazed announcers try to describe how another sewage-filled harbor has been cleared or how one more oil spill has disappeared. The pundits proclaim it is due to a shift in the tides, an effect of warming waters, or adjustments to the Gulf Stream, but for me it is a way of knowing that my pine scented friend is still finding enough to eat.

An Arachnophobic's Worst Nightmare

Brianna Stoddard

Being caught in the giant spider web in the wide old-fashioned doorway, April certainly didn't want to be there anymore. The night definitely had not gone as planned. *This old creepy house on the hill is avoided for a good reason.* She thought bitterly. But she was always *dying* to explore it and she had finally given in to her dark desire. Now where was she? Not staring at a treasure trove of old artifacts or in the face of a real-live ghost like she wanted, but stuck in a giant spider web! It was frustrating trying to wiggle out of it. There was no use. Every exhausting struggle ended fruitlessly. She called for help, but it was no use either. She had already screamed until her throat was sore. Not a soul could possibly hear her because she was far out of reach from the nearest street or house. Her only hope would be to wait until the web weakened or someone else happened to come by, both of which had slim-to-none chances of happening.

Uh-oh! She noticed a scratching sound approaching from behind her. *I don't want to know what that is!* She panicked. She struggled desperately to see what it was but she couldn't even turn her head. Then she just struggled like hell to get out as the pace quickened and multiplied until the sound was deafening. That is the only thing she heard when she was pulled backward with such force that April thought for a moment that it was an F5 tornado sucking her up. But she smacked down hard on her back in the next room, the gigantic ballroom. She was inside her worst nightmare! As her eyes focused on the horrific scene, she saw at least 1,000 big dog-sized spiders huddling around her, staring at her with eight hungry eyes each and drooling from their arachnid fangs. She was screaming blood murder as the *mother* walked up towards her from the darkened corner of the room. That heart attack of a spider was 20 ft. tall. *Oh my lord!* April thought as she gazed on, paralyzed in fear.

She hated to admit deep down that even if she could move, she would never make it back out the door alive. There was only time for one last thought before they began ripping her apart piece by piece. An invasion of baby spiders tore her apart as she screamed like never before and passed around pieces to their brothers and sisters. The blood squirted out of her like a bloody water fountain and those beasts thirstily lapped it up. *MONSTERS!*

She had thought. Almost nothing was left of her when she looked up and saw the mother spider closing her mouth around April's head. *I love you Mom!* was the very last thought April had on this god-forsaken earth.

Undercurrents of Fear

Ron Koppelberger

"Misstep mistake of this I partake,
Let it be true to the wind and
The sky, I'll do it or try, by the saints
We sigh, by tears and by seams and everything in
Shadow, by all in dark, this weave like the bark
Of a dog in hunt and a flicker of hope,
Let the sun be seen by the souls that seem
To be haunting the world in song
And spite to win the fight, the door saith the light and the
Best of what might!"

Take an adventure, a rollercoaster ride and test yourself, try your limits in unbridled fear as you read and discover the distance between rest and shivers.

About The Authors:

Matthew Wilson, 30, is a UK resident who has been writing since small. Recently these stories have appeared in Horror Zine, Star*Line and Sorcerers Signal. He is currently editing his first novel.

David Perlmutter is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The holder of an MA degree from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and a lifelong animation fan, he has published short fiction in a variety of genres for various magazines and anthologies, as well as essays on his favorite topics for similar publishers.

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, a short story writer and an artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He is always looking for an audience. He has been published in England, Australia, Canada, Japan, India, Mauritius, Italy, France, Germany, China, Spain and Thailand. He has been Published in The Stray Branch, The Fringe, Write On!!! (Poetry Magazette) Static Movement, Necrology Shorts and Record Magazine. He is a member of The Poet's society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

Craig Faustus Buck is a writer of many faces having been a journalist, a nonfiction book author, a writer-producer for network television, a feature film screenwriter, a short-story author and now a novelist. He was one of the writers on the seminal miniseries *V: The Final Battle* and wrote the famous episode where*The Incredible Hulk* dropped acid. His agent is currently shopping his first noir mystery novel, *Go Down Hard*, which was First Runner Up for the Claymore Award at Killer Nashville. His indie feature, *Smuggling for Gandhi,* is currently in preproduction.

Wendy Schmidt is a native of Wisconsin. She has been writing short stories and poetry for the last ten years. The Four C's; cat, chocolate, coffee and computer are her chosen writing tools. Pieces have been published in Daily Flash 2012, Three Line Poetry, Tainted Tea, Fear and Trembling, Verse Wisconsin, One Million Stories and Twisted Dreams, Taste Like Pennies Anthology, Haunted Object Anthology, Paranormal Horror, Barbie Anthology, From Their Cradle to Your Grave, No Rest for the Wicked and Skive.

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He has his original wife, but advises that after forty five years they are both out of warranty. Ed has had thirty six stories accepted thus far.

Mason Swithen didn't go to college right after high school, although he has taken some writing courses over the years. He enjoys movies, playing online computer games, and rooting for the Montreal Canadians. He enjoys Stephen King and Richard Bachman.

Jeff T. Robinson lives in Laramie, Wyoming with his grey-coated feline sidekick and wanders the streets for money

Nick Corbett is an aspiring writer based in Walsall, United Kingdom. He is currently working on several short stories in different genres including fantasy, horror and children's literature; while writing a series of science-fiction novels.

Bruce Markuson is married with two children. He lives in Milwaukee WI. And has a number short stories published. Bruce is also working on a number of series.
He enjoys writing and often finds himself with writer's obsession. He says the best way to write is to have an ending then write to that ending.

Brian Barnett lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife, Stephanie, and his three children, Michael, Sebastian, and Jane. He is the author of Graveyard Scavenger Hunt and A Closetful of Monsters.

A.J. Huffman has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and the winner of the 2012 Promise of Light Haiku Contest. Her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter, The James Dickey Review, Bone Orchard, EgoPHobia, Kritya,* and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call, Aphelion and Trembles Horror Magazine. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press and other publisher.

Lizz-Ayn Shaarawi is a Texan lost in the Oregon wilderness. She's a horror screenwriter and author whose short stories have been featured in numerous anthologies. Her screenplays have been recognized by The Austin Film Festival, The Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting, and The Page Awards. She is always searching for that elusive "next level" of writing and constantly strives to reach it.

D. L. Turpin lives in Appalachia with his wife and two dogs. He is an author of fantasy and horror, including such genres as Steampunk, Dieselpunk, Dark Fantasy, Gothic,
Weird West, Science Fiction, Celtic, High Fantasy, Heavy Metal, Splatterpunk, Cyberpunk, and cross-genre.

David S. Pointer has recent work published in "Tales of the Talisman," and "The Ghoul Saloon" anthology.

Thomas M. Malafarina has published five horror novels "Ninety-Nine Souls", "Burn Phone", "Eye Contact" , "Fallen Stones" and "Dead Kill – Book 1 – The Ridge of Death", as well as five collections of horror short stories; "Thirteen Nasty Endings", "Gallery Of Horror", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 1", Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 2", "Ghost Shadows" and most recently "Undead Living". He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called "Yes I Smelled It Too; Cartoons For The Slightly Off Center". All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press.

Sergio Palumbo is an Italian public servant who graduated from Law School working in the public real estate branch. He has published a Fantasy RolePlaying illustrated Manual, WarBlades, of more than 700 pages. Some of his works and short- stories have been published on American Aphelion Webzine, WeirdYear Webzine, YesterYearFiction, AnotheRealm Magazine, Alien Skin Magazine, on Orion's Child Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine, Farther Stars Than These, on Digital Dragon Magazine, on Kalkion Science Fiction and Fantasy Web Magazine, on Quantum Muse, Surprising Stories, on EMG- ZINE, on The Speculative Edge Magazine, on Australian Antipodean SF, on British Schlock!Webzine, on Australian SQ Mag, and in print inside 15 American Horror/Sci-fi/Fantasy/Steampunk Anthologies, 10 British Horror/Sci-Fi Anthologies, 2 Urban Fantasy/Horror Canadian Anthology and 1 Sci-Fi Australian Anthology by various publishers, and 10 more to follow in 2013/ 2014.

He is also a scale modeler who likes mostly Science Fiction and Real Space models, some of his little Dioramas have been shown also on some Italian (scale model) magazines like Soldatini, Model Time, TuttoSoldatini and online on American site StarShipModeler, MechaModelComp, on British SFM: UK site and Italian SMF .
The internet site of his Model Club "La Centuria": www.lacenturia.it
All the first drafts of Sergio's short stories are edited by Michele Dutcher, aka Bottomdweller, who lives in a carriage house in Old Louisville Kentucky with her border collie – Daisy Dukes.

Ken Goldman was a high school English and Film Studies teacher (Horror and Science Fiction in Film and Literature) at George Washington High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
He's a member of the former GWA, the Genre Writers Association.
Affiliate Member of HWA, the Horror Writers Association.

Ran Cartwright has written in a variety of forms and formats for years. He prefers horror, but has also written science fiction, fantasy satire, and noir. Two of his short horror tales were recommended for Bram Stoker awards.

R. A. Johns: Three of my short stories have been accepted for Thirteen Press anthologies Changes, War and One Hell of a Christmas My science-fiction short story 'April Fools' has been published in Octarine. I have a BA and MSt in History from Oxford University. My screenplay for the short film The Revolution is currently in pre-production directed by Leigh Hammond. My psychological play Random 12 was performed by Mithras Theatre Company and Waiting put on at the Burton Taylor Theatre. My play, Breaking Ice, was selected for the OUDS New Writing Festival, short listed by the Royal Court Theatre and selected for performance by the Head of the New Writing Initiative at the BBC and Nick Grosso. I've had a script reading and workshop at the Royal Court Theatre.

Brianna Stoddard has a short story in End of Days 4: An Apocalyptic Anthology and four stories in Emails of the Dead, both by Living Dead Press; one story in Ghosts & Demons, one in Were-what, and another in The Cedar Chest, as well as three stories in Oh the horror, and two stories published in the young adult anthology Thriller, all by Static Movement. She has published a romance novella How much is love worth? with Solstice Publishing/Solstice After Dark, now on sale at www.solsticepublishing.com and she has a

short story named “Destined Love” on their website . She has received contracts from Solstice Publishing for her dark fantasy book HUNTER GREEN and bisexual romance/erotica novella Pent up Frustrations as well. One of her stories is now published in Daily Flashes of Fiction 2011 by Pill Hill Press. She also has more stories getting published in other Pill Hill Press anthologies later this year.

horrifiedpress.wordpress.com